
**THE
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REVIEW**

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THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

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JACK NAISH

La Vernia, TX (Pop. 639)

in Texas we lived
in a long, grey ranch
house lost
in nine dull acres.
mom milked our goats
as the sun rose high
over flat uninterrupted fields.
my father fell in love
with the wildflowers but
I could smell goat shit
when the wind blew
just right and
I prayed before bed
that it all might go away.
I could hear their heads
hung in the fence wire
and I could never sleep
as their sad whale songs
cut the night.

Dope

my friend Craig Finn says he barely made 1990,
says the 80's almost killed him before he could.
he says the coke and the crack
nearly finished him,
the nights in liquor like a flood.

when he talks like that I ain't got a lot to offer,
shit never got too wild where I come from.
what I know 'bout bent spoons and paci's I seen in the movies,
never ate peyote,
couldn't find time before mom would call me home.

But I don't let Finn condescend,
just 'cause he took shit don't make him wise.
say he tries to get preachy or prop some
new wave, tripped-out hipster rave.
I know there's more than one way to get high.

see I figure my coke-cola and my trans-fat fries,
those are pretty racy anyway.
see, they've linked low density lipoprotein to
heart attack, stroke, god-awful disease.
that shit's pedal to the metal everyday.

Parasite

I got a tick
someplace
between the church
and the gate
as we walked to your
grave (it crawled past my sock
onto the back of my leg).
but I felt nothing.
and the priest
in attendance spoke
well of your existence
and your fulfillment
of duties as husband
and friend and worker
and father
(but I knew them
to be false, mostly the latter)
and as they lay you
into the earth,
the tick
buried his head
and found nothing.

Black Kettle

something special about this place,
maybe the way the thermals converge

and then rise upward, or how farmland
pastures touch miles of thick forests,

maybe because the opossums (littered like
Styrofoam cups along these

country roads) smell better here than a mile or
two in any direction,

something special about this place
brings them in, thousands circling, rising and

falling on columns of hot air, looking
for their next steamy meal, thousands

filling the branches of trees claimed by lightning,
baldheaded and ripe. today I watched

as an old woman walked from the post office
to her Buick and I feared for her, thought,

God, if she should even fall...

I read they migrate from the flat pampas
of Argentina to Canada's great lakes, soaring

over the land between, but they float here,
circling and dark like tar pitch,

JACK NAISH

they stare down on the roads
and the fields like great kings in towers.

in the American south, above the winding clay roads
and steeples, they've never looked more at home.

East Marion and Park

a slow evening at work
so I sit outside and
watch the sun sink behind
a brick wall, watch jet trails
fray into pink and white
across a blue canvas.

I watch this slow
southern town sigh,
curl its toes in
a happy yawn.

a full October moon
hangs low and orange from
wild Kudzu phone lines
as the summer's final
Cicadas drone on and
on, fighting away death.

in this moment,
everything is
slow and peaceful
and I feel God.

and I see God, standing
on East Marion Street,
great bodhisattva bum
thumbing his cobweb beard,
golden-eyed, smiling as
he fades into the details.

Lilacs and Hyperventilation

I wrote a poem but I
lost it.

a poem that could have
saved the world.

a truly beautiful conceit
involving the germination
of Lilacs and
hyperventilation (I wont give it away)
great enough to make us
all sing and dance
together in love.

I wrote about the beginning of
time and mentioned Christ
and his suffering and I
touched on Sandy Koufax
and it could've been sung
in a bar (it was a great drinking song).

it was about you and me
and everyone that we know
and how every word that
we have counts for something
bigger and more holy than we
ever could have realized.

it was going to make you
love me
and it would have
made you cry
as you hugged me

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and your eyes would've
been wet with joy.

it would've won a prize.

it would have been an end
to all suffering and it would
have convinced Favre to
play 'til he was 50.

it would've gone back in
time and turned Mark
David Chapman's ankle
outside the Dakota and it
would've changed how we
see literature, yeah, it would've
started a 21st century
renaissance and it would've
found life on Mars.

it would've fed five thousand
and one with a toothpick
and gone perfect with those
Christian Louboutins but
like I said I lost it

now we're back to square one.

Losing My Religion

He would have taken
the proverbial bullet
no hesitation.
Pain of outliving one child
too great a burden,
imagine doing it twice
just over a year.
Pop did it keeping his faith,
though I'm not so tough
'cause my faith died with my heart
the second go'round.
Suddenly ceasing to beat,
existence a drag
because my co-pilot crashed
into a phone pole,
too many drinks for driving
his girlfriend behind
the haunting black steering wheel.
Tough to envision
his life was in jeopardy.
I was in Iraq.
all the prayers were sent my way.
Wish I'd offered God
myself in his place but the
time already gone
for substitution of souls.
Hope heaven's happy,
my world meaningless now
sans faith, sans hope, only
dream of having my father's strength.
Tough to envision,
difficult to comprehend,
this reality.

Parched

The river is unclothed,
her private parts
pillaged by the sun.

The ground coughs dusty
curses to the
greedy clouds that pass

wretched like a mother,
who with full breasts,
hates her green children.

Birds labor in vain.
No worms, today. Their
babies hungry in ghettos

as threadbare trees
(mocked and molested by the wind)
make fists at the sky.

To save the land,
I turn off the faucet.
My tears are too small

to water the earth. I am
no one but the birds and
the trees and thirsty dust.

Blades of grass, now
turned daggers, draw
my blood to themselves.

LAUREN TAYLOR

My bodily apology on
behalf my race. I feed
the earth with my embrace.

SUMMER HESS

A Sheltered Life

The City of Shelby prides itself on maintaining its own unique identity, a community with a genuine small town character and quality of life that stands in stark contrast to the nearby heavily congested metropolitan areas in and around Charlotte.

Homepage, City of Shelby, North Carolina

"We need the community to see that the homeless are real people with real problems, and it's everyone's problem," [the director of the Abuse Prevention Council] said. "In fact, many people are just one paycheck away from homelessness."

The Star, Shelby, North Carolina

shelter *n.* A refuge; a haven.

I hear muffled yelling, slurred anger.

I force my shoulders straight and my face blank before I move to open the door. It's stuck. I wiggle and yank the handle before I remember the trick of throwing my weight against it and pushing up. The door squeaks open, and the cold creeps sharply into my skin.

"Christy is a whore! A Whore. Did you hear that? Christy is a whore." The words spew from a man's mouth, thick with smoky and intoxicated hatred. He is standing across the street from the Lighthouse Women and Children's Shelter, crowding the dull sky with proclamations about "his woman." I try to tame the nervousness that is suspended like a constant gulp in my throat. It is my first weekend working part-time as a night manager at the women's shelter, and I don't expect to see any men, let alone one who is tall, drunk, and screaming, screaming obscenities at a woman who came here to be safe.

"Get out of here," I say loudly, hoping to sound tough and used to reprimanding inebriated men.

He sneers at me like a kid glad to be caught breaking store windows. I can't tell if Leery is an ugly man or if I assumed his looks when I heard his ugly words.

"You need to leave or I'll call the police." My breath clouds moistly around my lips.

He smiles at me, as if to be friendly and introduce himself. When I slam the door closed I hear him yell, "You can't call the cops. I'm not standin' on your property." I tug on the lanyard that keeps the red panic button around my neck. What was it like for Christy when they lived together, I wonder?

Later, when the night is quiet, I write: *If Leery is that brazen and careless with his words in public, what would he say or do to her when they lived together? At the beginning, was it love? Then, did it become the love-drug, and each time she had to work harder for the love-fix feeling? Maybe she stretched to be someone else until something in her died, and she accepted it, because it was easier to be wrong about herself than to be wrong about love. At least in minimal existence there is some security. He will come home, even if it's to beat her.*

I ask Christy to come to the office so I can hear what happened, why Leery is outside yelling. She bumps as quickly as she can through the narrow doorway with a tipsy stroller. Her brown hair is softly curled around her face and her eyes are sharpened by thin, black eyeliner. She speaks immediately and her through her loose southern draw her words tumble out.

"That's my baby's daddy. I was just about to come and talk to you about it. I was taking my baby for a walk, mindin' my own business, and he saw me and followed me all the way here. I wouldn't stop and listen, so he walked behind me, yellin' the whole time." Her thin hands are slightly shaking. I hope for her sake that there weren't many people around to witness the scene.

"He won't leave," I say, "and he shouldn't be saying those things to you. I was about to call the police."

"That's what I was about to do, just as soon as I calmed down," she replies. I start to look up the number, but Christy has it memorized. I hand her the phone. I'm glad she is willing to make the call, that she is the one reporting her abuser. As she waits for an answer, I try to judge how upset she is. I can't tell. I offer to hold her daughter because she is too fussy to sit in the stroller. I wonder how much she can sense what is happening. I gently lift Ali from Christy's arms, trying to keep her head still and her body warm.

The police are on their way, and we wait. I ask Christy if she

has been through this before. She looks alert, like she is waiting for Leery to burst through the door. She peeks through the curtain to see if he is still there and breathes out slowly.

"Yeah, I never should have got with him. But now it's been years and I just..." she doesn't finish her sentence. She tries a new one, and it leaves her lips like a sigh: "I have Ali now, she saved me."

"She's beautiful," I murmur, stroking the tiny hand that is squeezing my finger, wishing I had more to say.

"I know," Christy replies. We both stare at the baby, so new and soft, vulnerable and eager to be close and to be touched. Christy takes the baby back and looks at her with what seems to me a silent promise in her eyes: I'll always keep you safe. While we wait Christy babbles in random spurts, telling me that she is ok, only she is anxious for the police to arrive. She also tells me that she doesn't want Leery to see the baby.

Later that week the phone would ring at three o'clock in the morning. My heart raced, because the only call I could imagine receiving at that hour was a crisis call from a woman in trouble.

"Abuse Prevention Council. This is Summer."

"Is Christy there?"

"I'm sorry sir, I cannot confirm or deny anyone staying at the shelter. I can only take a message and post it on our board. And, are you aware that it is three in the morning?"

"I'm sorry ma'am. Well, that's all right. You tell Christy that Leery called to tell her that I love her very much." The voice on the other end of the phone was strong, deep, tender, and sincere, a southern drawl like a cradle. He sounded like the kind of man I would want to tell me things some day.

By the time the police arrive, drunk Leery has wandered away, tripping over pieces of sidewalk and mumbling to himself. The policeman knows Christy and when she tells him Leery was drunk, he asks, "What else is new?" He leans against the door and looks down the empty street. "I drove around the block and didn't see anyone. He must have gone off and crawled into a hole."

This is the first moment that I realize the size of her battle. Christy has been here before, and she may be again. It's like she is climbing uphill with ropes that are weak or frayed by the instability of her addiction and the cycle of an unhealthy relationship. She is the

survivor of physical violence, the survivor of emotional violence, the mother of a child, the daughter of a mother. She is a woman who has made decisions, both good and bad. She is a woman who has to make the choice every day not to return to drugs and alcohol and a man who claims to love her. She is not a woman waiting for a magic fix. She is a woman who is trying.

definition *n.* A statement conveying fundamental character.

"If I could get a job working eighty hours a week, I would take it," Joyce says to me as we chat in the wood-paneled office with white supermarket floors. Beside us the surveillance cameras pulse choppy black and white images from different locations, allowing the staff to monitor everyone in and outside of the shelter.

"Where are you working now?" I ask Joyce. Her green eyes are wide and sincere. She sits firmly in her chair, calmly relating the story like she is reading from someone else's book. She takes our interview very seriously and offers slow, thoughtful answers.

"Fast food. I just started, but they already cut my hours." Joyce describes the employment predicament in Cleveland County that I will come to know as a common experience for women at the shelter. When she got the job working fast food, the restaurant promised her thirty to forty hours a week, but the schedule quickly changed to offer her less than twenty.

"Did you tell them your situation?" I ask, wondering if a woman admitting to her employer that she is staying at a homeless shelter would work for her or against her.

"Yeah, but it didn't really matter," she says. Joyce feels stuck. She tells me of the time when she stopped by two different fast food restaurants that had "help wanted" signs in the windows. The managers seemed positive about the possibility of employment. She filled out applications, and when she came to check on them the next day they said they weren't hiring, even with the signs still in the windows. "I felt downgraded for not being able to do better," she says. When she asked for a reason why they didn't hire her, she wasn't given one.

Joyce speculates, "Maybe employers had bad experiences from hiring people from here. The combination of alcohol and drugs means unreliable workers. They make it look bad for the men and women who are legitimately trying to get back on their feet and get their lives to-

gether. Legitimate women are having to make up for past image." She tells me that some landlords she has talked to were similarly ambivalent or made up uninteresting excuses when they saw her current address on the application. Her resume, even though she has consistently held a number of jobs, hasn't helped her either.

"[Employers] see my resume and look at me like I'm off my rocker, because I've lived everywhere. I have good reasons. They think, 'what's going to stop her from uprooting again?' without even asking why I moved around so much."

"What would you say if they did ask you?" I wonder out loud.

"I would mostly say mostly because of my family not giving me a choice," Joyce says. "Some relocations were to better jobs. Sometimes I moved to leave relationships. It was either move or be killed."

I ask her if anything has changed over the years.

She replies, "Back in the early nineties, it was men-are-superior type attitudes and women don't mean jack-shit. There's a lot more awareness now than there used to be. More victim advocates that are putting justice back in the victim's hands. They didn't use to have that type of stuff for people who had been physically, mentally, or socially abused. [The improvement] is not as much as it should be, but it happens a little bit at a time."

The first time Joyce ever went to a shelter was to leave a dangerous situation. "[My boyfriend] was drinkin' and druggin' real heavy and he got violent. I was like, 'see ya.' He beat the hell out of me, pulling guns and knives." She came to stay at the Lighthouse because, even though she is no longer being threatened by her ex, she feels as if she has no family or friend support. Her long history of abuse has also made her to never want to have anything to do with a man again.

She explains, "I'm more comfortable with women than men because of my past experiences." She also says that she is mostly happy with the response of other women at the shelter when she tells them that she is a lesbian. "It's very refreshing because they say, 'We don't care about what you do. It's no big deal.'"

When I ask Joyce about the role of shelters in her life, she says, "The Lighthouse provides a safe haven for people who have been abused. For the most part it has been helpful. The hard part is sometimes I feel like I've been pushed to find a place to go rather than [given] help so that I can go." Joyce leans forward, her back stiff with the heavy pressure of

trying for stability amidst uncertainty. Earlier that day we had gone to a job fair together, and we arrived only to find out it had been canceled. She still doesn't have a good job or a place to live and the cancellation makes her goals seem dimmer and further away. Her third month at the shelter is up in a week, meaning she will have to leave for at least fourteen days until she can be readmitted.

When I think of women like Joyce, I am frustrated by the very word "homeless." Defining people through an absence is not a definition, because a statement of lack does not convey who someone is. It only offers what people are not, as if who they are is insufficient to define them. "What" people are not is so much less important than "who" they are. The "what" is built from expectations, rankings, and assumptions within a social structure. The "who" is composed from dreams, scars, hopes, and fears formed within a dynamic person. The "who" may be influenced by society, but never truly defined, as even the most battered human shell contains the intangible, the inner, the always forming self. Women are not all homeless because they drink or take drugs. They are not all homeless because they can't keep a job or because they've never tried. They are not all homeless because they are mentally ill or because they've been abused. I know many people who drink too much, are lazy, or are addicted to some kind of drug and have home to sleep in every night. Their lack of home says nothing about women's fundamental character, other than that they have no safe, secure place to develop it.

When I ask Joyce if the homeless are stereotyped, she laughs: "Even the homeless have stereotypes of the homeless. There was a male client whose children and wife were staying at the women's shelter. He was constantly griping at his wife and saying to the kids, 'I don't want you having anything to do with those crack heads.' I'm sure others think like he did, even if they have never lived in this environment."

Even though she is very understanding of the reasons why people have stereotypes, Joyce is also sure that they are not all accurate. "Like myself, I never had the desire to even try drugs unless prescribed by a doctor. I'm lucky if I would [even have a] drink every couple years. My problem is getting away from abuse, employers not wanting to give me an interview. Then the money runs out..."

She continues, "With so many mills shutting down, people feel as if they don't have anywhere to turn. You make minimum wage at fast

food. The hours are unpredictable.

"It's tremendously difficult, especially if your only mode of transportation is walking. Downtown, there's either nothing or you need a degree. Most people here can't afford an apartment, let alone a degree. It's like, ok, what do we do?"

switch *n.* An event in which one thing is substituted for another.

Terry crochets continuously on her day off, glad to rest the feet that are her only form of transportation. She is making a thick, warm blanket for her husband who is on the road working the only job he can find for now.

"Ron and me don't have anything. He honestly makes me very happy. I can be me again. I would rather we live in a shelter than go back to that life."

"That life" with her former husband was a life of fighting, hitting, screaming, scar upon scar. And the kids, she worried so much about her children, and how that life would affect them in the future. "The kids have been through a tremendous amount. We have ruined our kids through what they've seen in our relationship...My daughter is a teenager and terrified of men. She says, 'I'm afraid I'm gonna live like you live.' Her biggest goal is, 'I want to live in peace.' There are nights when I [was] bloody, my [ex husband] screaming, and she's seen all that.

"People don't realize that I had to teach my children to be quiet. 'Don't tell your teachers. They might take you away from us.' I wish I could teach them now to go in there and scream. 'My momma and daddy are awful.' Instead, I told them, 'I stay here for ya'll. See what I take?' I remember doing this and I was wrong. All I can do is dig me out of it and be ready for when they're grown so they can ask."

I ask Terry how she managed to leave, considering she had married her high school sweetheart. Her marriage to Steve caused her family to disown her, and she hasn't received anything from them since she was eighteen years old. She had given up everything to be with a man, yet somehow she was able to break it off after more than a decade when women never do. Somehow Terry has learned that food on the table and a roof over her head do not make a home.

"Nothin' put in my hand can make me want you. Love is powerful. [Ron] (her new boyfriend) walks in the hot sun for me. He stayed

at a shelter for me. I didn't know what it was like to have words without scream and battle."

After she first left Steve, Terry sometimes missed the scream and battle because of what it gave her; a sense of family is hard to give up, even if it is dysfunctional, because it's the only one she's ever had.

"It's gradually getting better, but it got worse first. I'd think, you big dummy, you had it all. I never trust [Steve]. I know his agenda. It took me a long time to believe it, that something other than what I had lived was possible.

I told him,

'I'm gonna give you a year.'

I'm going on a diet.'

I lost 130 pounds

And a year later I walked out the door."

This is poetry. Not rhymed or metered, but free verse and living. Terry is now in her own house, hoping for Ron to join her. The Lighthouse cannot transform the years of messages that echo deeply within a woman's psyche, but it can and does provide a place to stay while a woman finds a way to reach inside herself for the switch. What if a woman is convinced that she can't get the job, that she doesn't have the skills, that it's not worth trying? If she thinks she can't, how is the switch flipped to can? Counselors can help a client think of reasons why a switch should be flipped, but they cannot flip the switch for her. Only the woman has access to a place that deep within herself. Sometimes she finds it, and sometimes she finds it at a place like the Lighthouse.

frag·ment *n.* A small part broken off or detached.

As these women tell and live their stories, I begin to realize that they use some of the very pieces they despise for their pangs and awful shapes to say who they are. These painful realities are difficult to accept, and as a result there are entire segments of our population that have remained fragmented because we have chosen not to see, not to listen, not to be affected by them. Isolation is damaging, but it does not have to be permanent. There are emotions and essences within us that are essentially similar, and we lose something essential if we ignore it. The essential has something to do with the way we hope, dream, love, and suffer. It has something to do with the basic desire for family and friends. The essentially similar appears at the shelter when Joyce wakes

up a little bit early every morning to make sure the timer on the coffee has worked and brings me—the new, idealistic, inexperienced college-student employee—a watery cup. I notice it when Christy has rare time to rest and admire her daughter. I see it in other women's frustrations over having to observe the shelter's rules regarding the way they discipline their children. I hear it when an eighteen year old woman is on the phone with her boyfriend, whose abuse drove her to the shelter, telling him that as proof of her love she has painted his initials on her nails. The essentially similar occurs in our common desires to love, defend, and rebel.

home *n.* The place where something is discovered, founded, developed, or promoted; a source.

Often women come to the office to talk about their day, their lives. In a way, the shelter becomes a home for me. I develop a way of seeing these women as women, not as homeless. They are women who, for a shifting collection of debatable reasons, have no place to live. During my training, the shelter manager advised me to treat every woman I encountered with the same respect I would want offered to my own sister or best friend if she was experiencing the same crisis. So while I was on the job I adopted an extended, racially diverse and multi-generational family. I could not meet every need or address every concern, but I could accept the woman who was standing in front of me and treat her situation with respect.

Part of respect was realizing that I couldn't assume that I understood the woman with whom I was working. Even if I knew some of the most obviously painful events of her often-traumatized life, I still did not know what it felt like to be her, what it was like to have those experiences, or how she feels about it all now.

Another part of respect is correcting misunderstandings. The women without homes in rural North Carolina are misunderstood. For example, urban homelessness has been researched far more than rural homelessness, and the homeless population is usually more obvious in big cities than a place like Shelby. Therefore, it is easy to picture a typical homeless woman as a minority or a crazy bag lady. In non-urban America, however, the demographics are so different that the homeless may be unrecognizable to most of the community. The National Coalition for the Homeless released a survey that says the rural homeless are

more likely to be white, female, married, and currently working. The Mayor's Taskforce on Homelessness Survey also reports that 55% of homeless women in Shelby are Caucasian while 33% are African American. In fact, every woman whose story I profile in this essay is white.

According to the Urban Institute, there are still 3.5 million homeless people in America. On May 21, 2004 at least forty-two of these people were living in Shelby. This number could easily be much higher because the homeless in rural areas are more likely to stay with relatives, using a shelter only as a last resort.

solution *n.* The method or process of solving a problem.

It is difficult to prescribe a solution to an issue that is an accumulation of complex situations. Like a game of Tetris, similar problems pile up in different orders and angles until there is no place left to go. The North Carolina 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness is committing more money to research so realistic solutions can be pursued. However, I think that homelessness is a community issue because national and state initiatives are weak attempts to accomplish what can be recognized and addressed only at the local level. It is too difficult to think of ending homelessness in America or in North Carolina. But if the citizens of Shelby consider homelessness their problem, then there is more possibility for change because the force of change—the people within the community—is already in place.

It seems that individual relationships, where homeless women are given the opportunity to honestly express themselves, are important. While the government may be able to offer physical assistance by helping people secure more affordable housing, it cannot give a woman the power she needs to believe in her own life. It cannot protect her from abusive relationships and the high risk she has remaining in them or returning to them. The personal support of community members is much more tangible and believable than government programs. The Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness is currently developing a 10-Year Plan specifically for Shelby, and if the regulation of funds does not restrict the community from addressing true needs, there is a chance that it will affect change. The local 10-Year Plan draft includes ideas like, "Only by getting to know these [homeless] people *as individuals* will the Coalition be able to reach them and get help." In recognizing the individual, the Taskforce is recognizing that a solution is a process, and that not

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all women will journey through their process of breaking the cycle of homelessness in the same way. The draft is still being reworked, and implementing its strategies may take some time, but the attempt to connect with the individual seems genuine and possible.

War Song

Again, a chemo room;
outside, sunlight in an empty garden,
a fountain plashing in the heat.
While taxol slides into your veins,
we make a grocery list—

A woman in the chair beside you
comments that our diet is much like hers—
broccoli and carrots, salad greens, fish.
Beets, she says, *are good and good for you.*
I write down beets.
Opposite, an old man says he loves beets,
with some pickling spice, his wife puts in.
She's from Palermo, the man says, pointing to his wife,
a mafia place, and smiles.
At your prompting, she describes her mother's hardships,
alone with four children and hostile in-laws,
during the last world war
and how long it took when the war was over
to get to the U.S. Her husband says
his wife's brother stayed in Italy: *he visits, always in a suit.*
The beets lady, you and I laugh politely.
A volunteer brings coffee, coke and tea.
You and the beets lady chat about your cancers.
I read a book — the beets lady is just beginning—
I know the six year history of your survival.

Like war, this cancer trauma comes in fragments,
a sputter of fear, a bomb, a fiery flash,
then almost silence:
More than for peace, we pray for victory.

Steepchase Amusement Park, Coney Island

Gated, like Sea Gate, a mile away,
to keep the riffraff out, patrolled
by men in clown suits brandishing prods
to air goose ladies in their summer dresses,
this was the Funny Place: not only rides,
but trees and "famous California bats"
(a cage of red wood baseball bats).

Here, within sight of the Atlantic and the crowded beach,
mechanical horses galloped along an outdoor track—
hold on, hold on.

Bare-legged children sped down giant slides,
tumbled on spinning discs;
a hundred swings flew high
in a sparkling sky.

Remembering Steeple Chase,
I smell again French fries at Nathan's,
kosher hot dogs and forbidden clams,
taste the smooth, cool sweetness
of pistachio custard—a palate's dream
of childhood at the shore,
when mom and dad were young
and, blanket spread,
they planted a striped umbrella in the sand.

Some Days

Some days you want to pull back
on the steering wheel of your life,
lift off and puff through the pillowy clouds,
where the air grows thin and thrilling and cold.

Some days you want to stand rooted
in an endless field of waving grass,
smelling the flowers like Ferdinand,
with the satisfying tang of grass in your mouth
as you listen for the drowsy drone of bees.

Some days you want to inflate your pontoons
and glide out of the harbor with wet salt in your nostrils
and the easy swells catching you,
lifting up and down as the sails billow full
under the clear dome of sky.

Some days all you need is the sound
of your children's voices on the phone,
the scent of a lover
and the taste of a ripe pear.

Horror

"I'm the man!" Robbie called out, pushing open the back door and stepping into the kitchen. He slammed the door, raised his arms in a gesture of victory, and yelled, "Who's your daddy?"

Inspecting his underarms for hair that morning, it had come to him suddenly, like the picture blinking on a TV screen: *He would skip.* He had tried to stay home from school but his mother was in one of her crabby moods, yelling at him to get up and get dressed.

School would suck, he knew it for a fact. The night before he had quarreled with Kyle, his best friend, at a church league basketball game and he knew it would continue at school, drawing in other seventh-grade boys as well. Kyle had called him a ball hog and gunner. He wasn't a gunner; he passed the ball. He was the team's scorer and Kyle was the defensive stopper. Those were their roles, like the analysts on TV said about the pro's. You had to know your role.

He went into his room and tossed his book bag on the bed, then made a tour of the house, glancing into each room and humming to himself. After checking out the upstairs rooms, he yelled, "Daddy's home!" and hopped down the stairs to the family room and rolled over on the back of the couch, scooping up the remote off the coffee table and clicking on the TV. He surfed through the channels before stopping at ESPN and watching highlights until a weightlifting show came on.

He got up and grabbed a soda from the refrigerator. In his room he saw his book bag on the bed and said, "I ain't taking no tests today!" That was another thing: he had tests in language arts and social studies. He would ace the social studies, after all, they were studying the Civil War, which was easy for him. But the vocabulary test in language arts would be hard. He could remember the meanings of the words, but their spellings eluded him. The words were never spelled like they were pronounced.

Now he had one more day to study the words before the test.

Yeah, he thought, shooting a foam ball at the plastic goal hooked on his door, today was a good day to skip. And it was so easy! He had never skipped before, but he and Kyle had often discussed how it could

be done. And now he had done it! He had slipped into the woods on the way to the bus stop and then hid behind a large oak until the coast was clear. He used his key for the back door and the house was his. School would phone a message about his absence and he'd erase it from the answering machine. When the absence appeared on his report card, he'd claim it was a mistake, and since he made decent grades and wasn't a problem at school, they'd believe him. He had it all figured out.

Kobe dishes to Rodham—he scores! In his mind an announcer called the play-by-play. *Kobe Bryant and Robbie Rodham—what a combination. Both can shoot from the outside, or penetrate!* The cheers were loud as he performed a series of jump shots and moves, the foam ball palmed in his right hand as he slammed it violently through the plastic hoop.

He tomahawked a reverse dunk in his glory-filled reverie when he heard the garage door rattle open. He stopped to listen: No one was due home. A car pulled into the garage and the garage door clattered down to its distinct final shake. He grabbed his book bag and dashed into the closet, quickly eying the room before closing the closet door as softly as he could.

The door off the kitchen opened. "Hurry, we've only got an hour," his mother said, her high heels clicking across the floor.

"I'm hurryin, I'm hurryin!" a man said in a joking voice; a voice Robbie didn't recognize. He swallowed, fidgeting, crowded among his clothes. The man said something and his mother laughed. Footsteps ran up the stairs.

There was a thump as if someone upstairs jumped on a bed. Muffled sounds fell on him and he sank to his knees as if receiving blows. Pushing away his book bag and shoes and basketball, he curled up on the floor beneath the hanging clothes. He'd tell his dad. That'd fix her. But the thought scared him, and he clenched his fists tightly in front of his mouth. Soon tears wet his face.

It was cramped and stuffy on the floor and the carpet smelled of dust. He stood and grabbed a shirt tail and wiped his face. Quietly he opened the closet door and crept from his room and down the hallway to the kitchen. His mother's keys, cigarette lighter, wallet, and some tissues lay scattered on the table next to her tan purse, which had been dropped there in her haste. The thin leather strap, the color of sand, dangled over the edge of the table. He gathered the items and pushed them

into the purse and turned it upright. The leather was soft and smooth to the touch and he squeezed it gently between his hands. Sounds as faint as distant echoes whispered to him from upstairs.

The door to the garage was open and he looked in. He noticed the film of dust along the side of her car and descended the steps and walked around to the rear. The warm air of the garage hung heavy with the oily smell of exhaust. The car's box-like shape was coated with the dust that came from the road work on Elysian Fields. With his finger he wrote HORROR in large capital letters across the rear of the trunk. Everyone said it was the worst name you could call a girl. The rust-colored dirt covered the tip of his finger and he smeared it on his jeans. It looked like blood. His eyes teared, and he cursed her as he ran up the steps and back into the kitchen.

The slender green cigarette lighter sticking out of the purse caught his eye. He picked it up and an idea occurred to him. He thumbed the cylinder and out danced a yellow and blue flame. The smoke detector'll surprise them, he thought, holding the swaying flame beneath the calendar on the wall. The month of May and the months behind it began burning immediately.

He placed the lighter back into the purse and was going out the door when he looked at the burning calendar and saw a flame crawl onto the wallpaper. It seemed to hesitate a moment, then a yellow finger-size flame poked up, and the fire grew, its flames low as it climbed toward the ceiling and inched along the wall. The burned wallpaper, black now, curled as if in pain. He waited for the smoke detector and wondered why it wasn't shrieking the piercing cry that often surprised them when something was baking in the oven.

Softly he closed the door and expected to hear it as he jogged away from the house, his body excited as though it were the beginning of a league game. He crouched low in the bushes as he scrambled to the grandfather oak he had waited against earlier.

It all felt strange in the strip of woods that acted as a buffer to the cul-de-sac. It was like a different day. Sunlight brightened the bushes and trees and it was cool in the shadows as he sank down against the oak. The caw of a crow high in the trees drew his attention. Above, white clouds sailed beyond the treetops. He closed his eyes and concentrated with all his might, straining to hear the smoke detector. When he looked at the kitchen window, he was stunned to see red and blue flames flickering in the shadowy room.

Legs unsteady, he stumbled into the backyard. The curtains were closed on her bedroom window and the blue sky and drifting clouds reflected on the glass. His throat felt thick and dry. *Mom*, he said, but it came out hoarse; a whisper. He turned suddenly and ran into the woods. Stickers from weeds and bushes grabbed his jeans as if to hold him back.

KEVIN MARSHALL CHOPSON

Becoming Night in Pittsburgh, November 17, 2005

With each second this sky transforms.
Each look away, and back again,
blows wisps of white
into a dismembered winter gray.

Lower clouds, small and pulled down
into the cold of a settling sun,
drop spirals as the golden red yellow
disappears into the darkening blue –

the sky no longer the fire,
it becomes the smoke.

Coffee

Brown, like mulch around
trees in the spring after
a day under a mild sun,
not *black* like the night.

Sugared, it cuts through
a dull morning – like tin
shovels crunching the firm
surface of the soil.

Ode to Lemoncello

from the Pelican Bar, Daytona Beach

This is the end of the world.
What would it be like to face
this ocean every day?
Knowing that the line I see
six miles out continues to extend
and extend and extend.
Could I float out there
in this wind and rough surf
from horizon to horizon,
sleep across five thousand miles
of wet dreams
and return to Sorrento –
land of lemons
and Lemoncello,
the strong liqueur
stored under the table
in a shop full of wooden boxes?
A clandestine sip,
a taste so thick and warm.
Does my Margarita
pale in comparison?
Its Tequila part of this continent,
evoking desert and worm
not the lovely face
of a more foreign language –
a lush tongue
dressed in the curves
of sweet marble.
I lick the salt
from the rim of my glass,
from my lips,
but dream of you,
my Lemoncello.

French Harp

My family lived in the Clinchfield cotton mill village. It was 1926, and I was four years old that summer. This was three years before the textile strike--the most famous event in Milton's history--a drama that brought the National Guard and the author Sinclair Lewis to our town and would eventually bring the deaths of six striking mill hands, deaths inflicted by the law in our county.

My own daddy was a cotton mill hand and continued to work through the strike. At the time he was father to six children and worried about our family's need for income. So he worked. After all, my mama made money only by selling eggs that her hens laid. Her real job was raising her children and taking care of visiting kinfolk who would stay days or weeks at a time. It seemed like all my mama did of a day was cook, wash dishes, and start cooking again for the next meal.

But the mill strike took place when I was seven. The story I want to tell now took place in a more peaceful time in Milton when I was four.

That summer of 1926, I was too young to go with my older sisters to the company store. Mama would send Ruby and Helen to fetch some coffee, a pound of sugar, or something she needed for supper. The store was across the street from the cotton mill, so I longed to go there, in hopes of seeing Daddy at his dinner hour.

But Mama kept me back. She warned me to stay out of the road when I stood in our dirt front yard and watched my sisters follow a side path out of sight.

"Come up here, Esther," she yelled and patted the seat beside her in the porch swing. She and my great-aunt Ellen, who sat in the rocking chair nearby, strung and snapped green beans and swatted flies.

But I stood firm and waited for Ruby and Helen to come home, hoping they'd bring me some hard candy.

Like my Grandma Burgin, I was stubborn, and I resented my mama's rules. After all, I was nearly as tall as my sisters, the three of us looking like triplets with our Dutch boy haircuts. But this fact didn't make any difference to Mama. I suspected she was still put out with me

for recently hiding in the outside toilet when Doctor Miller, the company doctor, came to take me to the hospital. Who could blame me though, when the doctor drove up in his black Packard, his bulldog—who looked like his master—sitting up in the seat beside him?

My oldest sister Clara had walked with me earlier that particular spring day to the Milton Hospital that stood on Main Street. While we waited in a cool, antiseptic-smelling office, I heard sounds—metal clinking and water running—coming from the next room, and I knew these were preparations being made for my surgery. It was then I took off. I ran down Courthouse Hill, stumbled on the hard sidewalks, passing the fine homes, then the woods, then the produce stand, where I crossed the road and followed the sidewalk in front of Clinchfield School. Soon I was in my own backyard and safe within our outside toilet. I hid there and heard the doctor's car. Later Mama told me Dr. Miller came himself to take me back to the hospital and he was mad as a hornet. "Where's that girl?" he asked her. He and Mama looked all over the property for me, but didn't think to check the toilet. Dr. Miller knew my family well, having made enough visits to our house to lance my tonsils when Mama's bark and corn meal poultices and doses of Black-Draught didn't do the trick. My quinsy would blister my tonsils and swell them so tight I could hardly get a drop of water through. Most of the time the lancing was enough to cure me. But during a recent visit, Dr. Miller insisted my tonsils must come out, and I wasn't bothered about it until I heard the noises in the hospital. Mama never made me go have the surgery, and to this day I still have my tonsils, but for a few weeks after my escape, she treated me with suspicion.

"Mama, I'll just stand here," I said now as I waited by the road, knowing my sisters would return that way. Aunt Ellen peered at me over her spectacles.

Finally, I saw Ruby and Helen. Two girls, one towheaded like me, the other as black-headed as an Indian, walked toward me, still some distance down the road. I turned to see that Mama was facing Aunt Ellen, both of them busy working with the beans. So I took off running.

Before I could greet my sisters with "Hey," I heard Aunt Ellen scream, *Lord Jesus!* and I felt myself bouncing along the road, my body pinned (when I had sense enough to realize it) by an automobile. In some distant world, I could hear my mama's voice squealing, *Lord, stop,*

you're dragging Esther! And though my head grazed the road from time to time, I heard Ruby and Helen screaming too.

It all lasted a few seconds. Mr. Abernathy, the Victrola salesman, had been driving mercifully slow, and when he realized he'd side-swiped me and dragged me alongside, he stopped, leapt out of his Model T, laid me inside the vehicle, and raced me to the hospital.

I don't recall much else. Though Mama and Aunt Ellen had thought me surely killed, I was more addled than hurt. I received a gash across my forehead, and black cinders were embedded along my hairline. Even today, I could show you some cinders.

The next day, Daddy brought me home from my overnight stay at the hospital. When we walked in the front door, we smelled the sweet creamed corn that simmered in a skillet on Mama's wood-burning cook-stove back in the kitchen. Mama helped me into her high feather bed, a fluffy pillow propped behind my back, and she brought me my dinner right there in her room. She sat on the edge of the bed and watched while I ate like a starved hobo. That was a sight she'd see often in the coming years of the Depression. In time, it seemed like every day a hobo would jump from a train and follow the Clinchfield railroad tracks till he found Mama's back door. People used to say that hobos let each other know where food would be given. That must've been true because Mama fed many a hungry man a piece of cornbread and a glass of buttermilk--whatever she had in the kitchen.

After I finished my meal of beans, corn, potatoes, and biscuits, I was so full I could hardly whisper, "I'm sorry, Mama." She said, "Hush, Esther. Your sisters have something to give you."

Ruby and Helen tiptoed in. "We went in together and got you this," Helen said and pulled a small rectangular box from behind her back.

"Now you can make some noise," Mama said and laughed in her throaty way.

I opened the narrow box: the French harp--nickel-shiny and cool in my hand--was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen. When I blew into the holes, the sound moaned like the train whistle we heard at night.

"Imported from Germany," Ruby said. Her words didn't mean anything to me, though I knew my sisters had sacrificed a Saturday at the picture show--the highlight of their week--to get this French harp for me.

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Later that night I lay with the French harp hid safe under the feather pillow, and I rested as peaceful as I would ever rest in my life. Mama sat on the edge of the bed and watched me till I fell asleep.

Incident on the Train

Wearing gold lame shorts
and a halter top,
she boarded the train at Harlem.
Her nails were ten red

hooks curling toward
her palms, her blonde wig
askew. Convinced he stole
her cigarettes,

she argued with a white
man, four rows up, who refused
to hand them over,
claiming he didn't smoke

and "by the way,"
he said, "you're crazy." She
replied, "at least I ain't
no thief."

Seventeen

Somehow you never meet the boys
Who drive convertibles, the ones who breeze
By you on the highway, doing at least eighty—
Blonde hair rippling like fields of ripe wheat.
You imagine them pulling into long driveways
Leading to houses often featured
In glossy magazines, with swimming
Pools, gazebos and garage apartments
For the family chauffeur.

Instead, you meet your best friend's pimply
Brother, who wears black stretch socks
With open-toes sandals and sets the cruise control
On his dad's sedan ten miles below the speed limit.
He keeps a five-dollar bill pinned inside
The waist band of his pants for emergencies,
And buys you a wrist corsage from Walmart
A week before the prom—a pale orchid
With brown spots forming near the edges.

So you close your eyes for the first slow dance,
Imagine your head on a different shoulder, broader,
More solid—his wind-whipped hair just grazing
The collar of a single-breasted dinner jacket.
He whispers a line of Rilke in your ear, tells you
That you are all the gardens he has ever gazed at,
Longing—not how he's decided for sure,
To attend community college since
It's so much cheaper and closer to home.

SUMMER HESS

Dusk

The wind exhales,
scraping through the trees like desperate fingers
grabbing for the branches, trying not to fall.
The dust swirls, spitting
bursting puffs like coughed from the earth.

Then the wind slows
into the distance and dies at the low place where
day and night meet in a melty embrace
and the light bends in their play.

These last colors dream across the mountains.
Sun rays, exhausted from intense hours of glaring at the land,
now smother the mountains.
The magenta disk slides behind the
purple knuckled hills and pink swollen fists
bruised by another long day of punching the solid blue sky.

Equations

It's purely mathematical
Logic-based
Simple
All right angles
And white light.

Then we met
The light bent
And
I
Prismed.

Love is change.
I am changed.

Toenails

"I cannot believe what I just saw in the ladies room," Martha says. Clearly she disapproves of whatever it was. That premonitory crease appears above her brow, the one that stretches crookedly over one eye, then dives down sharply to the nose. The Wrinkle of Doom, we call it.

"There was a woman in there with her bare foot on the sink, painting her toenails."

"What color?" I ask.

Martha looks at me as if I had stolen the coffee mess money to fund terrorist activities. "What a stupid question. Who cares about that? The point is, what was a woman doing in a CIA restroom painting her toenails two weeks after the worst terror attacks in US History?"

I know I shouldn't try to speculate aloud on the answer to this question. Martha isn't interested in my opinion. She thinks of me as a failure, since I am the same age as she, but elected not to strive for senior grade. "I'm senior, you know," she will remind me from time to time for no good reason -- or perhaps because she knows I have so little respect for her. "Yes Martha," I long to say, "You don't need to remind me that you're my boss. I have the ulcers to prove it." But I don't say it out loud. I avoid the grief it would cause.

I know I should say nothing this time, too, but I feel compelled to speak, perhaps to prove I have as much right to express an opinion as she does. I've been feeling like less than a nobody lately. Far less.

"Maybe it's her way of coping," I say. "Sometimes in the midst of chaos, silly little activities help you to calm down, think Straight."

"Well, if she worked for me, I would have plenty of things I could assign her to do. She should be ashamed of herself." Martha's face sucks into a pout. She's the sort of person who tries to make you feel guilty for any non work-related activity you might engage in in the wake of 911. Like sleeping or eating or drinking a cup of coffee. Or breathing.

I find myself wondering what color that woman is painting her toenails. Blood red? Black? Orange like the fireball that burst from the side of the tower as we stood and watched the television screen? Is that

her way of making it real? I am almost tempted to get up and go to the ladies room to see. I want to talk to that woman, find out her story.

But I'm tired and busy. Way too much of both for unnecessary motion. For a dizzy moment, I can't remember whether it's morning or noon or night. Martha and I are in the Xerox room, deep in the interior of the New Headquarters building, far from September blue skies or black night skies or overcast skies or whatever they happen to be at this hour, whatever it is. She has come in to check on my progress in printing and collating my latest intelligence report, the one that should have gone out to the policymaker two hours ago and would have if the high-speed printer hadn't broken. I thought Martha was going to strangle me when I told her I couldn't get the report out on deadline. The wrinkle of doom cut deep. I could hear the steam building up inside her head, the low whistle as it began to escape from her ears.

"But that report *has* to get out," she had said.

"Well, would you like me to copy it by hand? My penmanship is excellent." That only made her angrier. I shouldn't have added that part about the penmanship. But what could I do? The machine was broken and it would be another hour before the overworked repairman came.

Now I am finally in business again and Martha has come to supervise, as well as to criticize women who paint their toenails in the CIA ladies room. Copies are shooting into slots on the side of the machine, which is out of staples. I am collating, hand stapling, doing the same things I did when I worked in the university library to pay my way through graduate school -- only to end up twenty years later collating and stapling, with my boss hanging over my shoulder, willing me to move faster.

"This is so late," Martha says with a high hint of a sob in her voice. She sits on a chair in the corner, wiping her glasses on her skirt, holding them up to the light, frowning at them, wiping them again. It's a nervous tick of hers, I wouldn't be surprised if she rubbed a hole in her skirt, or in the lenses. "I cannot believe I'm going to have to bring this to the Director this late."

"I stayed up all night writing. What else can I do?" My voice is calm, matter-of-fact.

"I suppose I can tell that to the Director."

Of course she can't say such a thing. She must quietly take her

lumps, storing them away in her gut to marinate in acid and be redistributed amongst her subordinates the following day.

Martha hates the fact that I question her. Hates me and all the other people who work for her, who never come up to her standards. Which means that she can't come up to her own inhuman standards or those of the people above her. I glance up briefly to check the condition of the Wrinkle of Doom. It threatens to crack her face in two. She looks like holy hell. Two weeks after the attacks, and she looks ten years older. I could swear that there is more gray in her auburn hair, more lines around the eyes and mouth. Her color is unearthly, as if the dust from the towers had settled on her flesh and become part of it.

I should pity her, but it makes me angry that she feels she has to be here. Finally I say, "Do you think I won't work hard unless you sit there and frown at me? Do you think there is anyone in the Counterterrorist Center who wouldn't work themselves half to death even without your supervision?"

She takes a deep breath and I can see that she's searching for something to say that will cut me down to size, put me in my place. She's one of those women managers who look out for number one and never reach down to pull any of their sisters up behind. Thankfully they are becoming more rare, are being replaced networkers and mentors — a more balanced group of women on the whole. But maybe the new ones don't have to put up with as much crap as Martha did on her way up. I'll give her the benefit of the doubt, even though she would never do the same for me. She is in genuine distress and has been since the day she arrived in the Center.

She had never worked counterterrorism before, never worked in an office where lives were at imminent stake. She covered the old, slow former Soviet Union. She did a stint in the budget office, as all up-and-comers do. She had served as an executive assistant to the Director -- where there are constant crises, most of them originating in the need to placate some supersize ego rather than in anything real. It threw her for a loop to find out that there was so much honest mayhem out there. "I go home every night thinking a bomb might go off," she confessed to me early on.

"You can't do that," I said. "You'll go crazy."

"We should all do that," she said in her most moralistic, school-marm voice.

"Those of us who are in it for the long haul can't," I insisted.

She's disliked me ever since, considered me less than serious, less than dedicated. But I'll still be here long after she's gone. I'll let it ruin my life, and she'll go on to ever higher positions.

I remember my orientation to the Counterterrorist Center. They had an analyst come and talk to us. He was the one who covered terrorism in Saudi Arabia. He was the one who was on the account the day of the explosion in Khobar. He read a letter from the mother of one of the people killed. He was her only son. The analyst cried as he read. He reads the letter at every orientation, cries every time, because perhaps he could have prevented it if he had read all of the hundreds of reports that come in every week. But he couldn't get through them all, just like none of us can get through them all. But somebody has to try, right? And that somebody can't go home every night thinking about the bomb that is about to go off, because there will be a lifetime to do that after it explodes.

It is still too early to say how 911 will affect me in the long run. The shock has not worn off. I'm too busy to think about it. I watch the machine spitting out the pages of my report without pause. I don't want it to stop, don't want to hear the quiet left in its wake. When we have time to pause, that's when the trouble will come, that's when we'll begin to suffer. Everyone is afraid of that time, but no one will say anything out loud. I can feel the fear all around me, radiating from these people who have chosen to spend their lives this way. It makes them work like fiends. Stupid Martha, frowning down at us. Do you really think you're needed here? I try not to hate her, not to hate anybody, but it's early still. I don't know yet which way my character will warp. I only know that it will, like a glass rod in the flame, like steel in an explosion. It will become soft in the middle, lose its shape, bend and twist in some direction I cannot yet imagine.

The machine stops. The red light begins to flash.

"Jammed," I say.

I get down on my knees and open the door of the machine, flip levers, tug at singed paper. These days I think a lot about the way various things smell when they burn.

Martha throws her glasses to the floor and buries her head in her hands. "Damn you," she says. "Damn you."

You're Always Going on About the Near Misses

The last time I saw him he was
drunk and angled downward
cursing at the world but holding off on the
apocalyptic visions because
really...come on...
a few moments in libertine preambles
could be better spent, sure,
but who closes the door on this rancid memorabilia?

Not me
I'm stuck regaining strength and teaching
my arms to bend again
while all around the poetry of arrogance becomes
more pungent from year to year to year.
The dog stares at your finger when you point at its only goal
and the juvenile séances turn my stomach inside out.
Blisters and fake encores, old records and arch rivals.
(I saw a grown man click his heels but do I
answer phone calls?)
Sometimes I try for natural imagery but all that comes out
stares back like an unearned warning.

To Lae

After two weeks in the western highlands,
The warmth of the coast beckons relentlessly.
I have a co-pilot's view as we begin crawling up the steeps
And screaming down to one-lane bridges.

My nostrils are filled with thick cool air
And the occasional whiff of diesel fumes,
My mouth with beef crackers and greasy chips,
A welcomed snack from a kai bar in Goroka.

Stopped twice by highway bandits
Wielding guns and shovels,
We're left a few kina short and
Behind schedule,
But the driver makes up time,
Working the gears like an Indy-car racer.

He charges thousands of pot-holes on the chip and tar
And swims the dull turquoise, snorkel equipped, public motor vehicle
Through wide washed out sections of small creeks.

After the near miss of a wild swine,
Too many off-the-road swerves
And several challenges with opposing traffic,
We reach Kassah Pass;
An 8,000 foot pull-off where the best view
Is taken by a row of pissing men.

The greens are lush and intense,
Fading from heavy, jungle-covered mountains enveloped in fog
To the new greens of the Markham valley,
Into which we plunge at chassis vibrating speeds.

The driver's ball cap shades his slight, focused grin.
With his match-lit pall mall
And red-stained mouth of betlenut,
He seems content to simply cruise...

We make small talk.
Between his broken English and my limited Piseon,
There's plenty of time to soak in the experience,
To hang my arm out the window and feel the breeze.

As my gaze deepens on the landscape,
My mind takes off...
I go from friends back at school and
The inter-workings of the Wantok philosophy I've been learning.
To how long it's been since I phoned home...

My thought-life is interrupted suddenly.

The tire I'm sitting above blows out with a hiss and thud,
A quick change under the endless sapphire sky surrounded by valley
Grassland, and
We're off again.

A slew of miles logged and
Drastic temperature and elevation changes
Land me in Morobe province,
The coast at last.

A thirty kina bus fare and a day's travel deliver me,
Not unlike the organic highland veggies jammed under the seats,
To the bustling port-city of Lae.

America, the Beautiful

I would like to apologize
for taking your sacred land
starving your women
killing your sons
ignoring your human rights
desecrating your home
humbling your chiefs
and throwing you into reservations.

I would like to apologize
for buying your brothers
placing them in chains
cracking the whip
raping your women
beating your children
exploiting your tribe
and forcing you to die on boats.

I would like to apologize
for the Ku Klux Klan
enforcing black codes
writing Jim Crow Laws
sitting you on the back of the bus
insisting you order from the kitchen
busing your children to separate schools
and being hatred into your beings.

I would like to apologize
for throwing you in camps
issuing only a blanket per family
shoveling slop down your throats while
drinking sewer water
turning you into a number

forgetting your names
and bombing your homeland.

I would like to apologize
for all the senseless deaths
requiring your blood
sending you to a foreign land
killing your generation's spirit
feeding you opium to cope with the pain
calling your number in the draft
and letting you die for an unworthy cause.

I would like to apologize
for blacklisting the communists
persecuting the Arabs
placing dictators in power
wasting all of our natural resources
refusing to listen to you
denying the truth glaring at me
and all the things I forgot to mention.

In all fairness,
I am only an infant
in the grand scheme of things.

Mr. Mayhem

"Young man. Young man," a shrill, male voice called out, clearly meant for me. Typically I would not turn to answer anyway, but at the fair, that high school reunion for people who never graduated high school, I tried especially hard to avoid anyone's summons. I knew that eye contact could trap me in some mendicant's bucktooth web, and I may soon find myself playing a game to win a prize cheaper than the entry fee, but this call caught me off guard. Down at the dark end of things with the wobbly rope bridge and volunteer fire department's bouncy castle, far removed from the Ferris wheel or Zipper or Kenyan fire eaters, I did not expect a salesman's pitch and turned without thinking.

"Young man, please come here," the man said when I stopped walking. My girlfriend heard him too and we smiled knowingly at each other.

The man, whose thick hobo beard made penning down his age difficult, wore a ratty three piece suit with top hat and tails, the kind of easy to go to image music video directors use alongside pretty girls in gas masks and falling leaves against a dark background when they want a dark aura. He stood in front of a translucent red curtain surrounded by a homemade mural and behind a sign reading 'Special Price – Today Only – 2 Dollars.' I stared at the paintings for a moment, having made a point to pay more attention to this homegrown art form. I had long valued the artistic value, but I neglected their educational merit. For instance, were it not for the county fair, the annual boon to the local elephant ear and inflatable novelty hammer industries, few would know the types of women who dominate the field of jungle exploration. Surprisingly, some people do still trudge through jungles, dodging poisonous darts and suggestive pythons, and they aren't your Bear Grylls and Professor Harold Monroe types, the nerdy-yet-rugged Eagle Scouts of TV and movies. Walking through the fairgrounds, patrons will have their misconceptions corrected by not one but three reminders via mural that only castoffs of Russ Meyer remakes get the necessary grants and funding to explore the primary colored landscapes of today's jungle societies. These woman, all tight shirts and machetes, urge people meeting

the minimum height requirement to double check the safety bars of the Diamond Cutter and Akalula's Revenge and welcome kids to the mirror and slide pseudo-adventure of Raiders for the Lost Tomb. They sing the same siren song as the P-funk princess kneeling in the Rachetor's mural and the purple and pale dominatrix fighting off mini-Cerberusses at the entrance of Lazarus's Revenge, whose unique academic value I'd yet to figure out.

The painting behind this man, however, included no selective surgery miracles or Freudian imagery and instead had only two images separated at the top by the phrase 'Come See Mr. Mayhem.' On one side of the curtain someone drew a pig in a red, white, and blue Evel Knievel outfit complete with cape and action lines drawn behind indicating flight or fall or something, and on the polar an image of the same pig, presumably, standing on a snow-covered mountain. He wore spiked shoes, aviator sunglasses, a thick jacket with fur around the collar and at his feet, stuck in the snow, was a tiny Swiss flag.

"How would you two like to come see Mr. Mayhem, the most talked about pig in this hemisphere?"

'More than,' I started to say but luckily I stopped myself. Not a single famous pig, real or metaphor, came to my mind.

"What's so special about him?" my girlfriend asked as we cynically eyed the new hooks stuck in our mouths. "Does he have two tails? Is he really small?"

The man made a scoffing noise and said, "Mr. Mayhem is a bit beyond that. Those freak show animals can't compare to the nacreous wonder of Mr. Mayhem for you see Mr. Mayhem -" he paused and looked us each in the eyes before speaking again "- Mr. Mayhem is the world's only self-aware pig."

"Then why isn't he the most talked about pig in the whole world?" I asked, and the man started to answer but my girlfriend interrupted him.

"What do you mean he's self-aware?" she asked. "How does a pig become self-aware?"

"Well," he said and turned his shoulders to her, "there are a couple of theories for that question, but one thing is clear: Mr. Mayhem is an autodidact. In fact, he finds most attempts at formal education moribund and tedious. Now, as far as the theories are concerned, two main ones exist and there is no syncretic union here. Each group has its own

followers who are passionate and unforgiving towards the other side. One group postulates that the change occurred as a single event in his youth, that he was kabonged in the head with something and the change occurred instantaneously."

"How do you know he wasn't born that way?" she asked and grinned.

"A good question," he said, "but his original owners noticed enough changes in his behavior to suggest that something happened to him. One of their offspring has recently stepped forward to claim responsibility for said cranial contact, and in his eyes the change occurred overnight. He claims, as do many others, that around the age of 6 or 7 months Mr. Mayhem stopped eating with the other pigs, started constantly looking in mirrors, and had a trenchant apprehension towards typically swinian undertakings." He paused and nodded at my girlfriend. "Plus, he became a paruretic."

"What's -"

"The other theory is that the process occurred slowly and gradually and began after he was fed pig's hoof unintentionally. Believers claim that that one instance of accidental cannibalism led to the development of a moral voice, and he began to experience the same basic ethics versus aesthetics dilemma we all face. He could not deny liking the pig's hoof, but the ethical implications were devastating."

He looked at me and I couldn't help but nod, although I didn't quite understand his point. Having a barker speak directly to me, as opposed to the 'Step right up and see' loop repeating ad nauseum during the lead up to the chainsaw artist's show or at the Animals of the Old West exhibit, made me more suspicious, but it also plastered my tongue to the roof of my mouth. In my mind, I'm always able to outwit con men, and pretty much anyone else, but the internal practicing rarely paid off on game day.

"So what do you say?" the man asked.

My girlfriend shrugged.

"It's only two dollars."

"Yes. Just two dollars," the man said. "Per person."

I paid the man as quickly as I could, hoping to avoid the scent off blood in the water, and we walked behind the illuminated curtain. The other side surprised me. Given the amount of time personally spent pulling the two of us in, I expected to find only a tiny pen with a pig

inside. Instead, we walked into an overcrowded audience waiting in front of a homemade stage. Another curtain, this one a darker red, hung behind a microphone stand, and most of the crowd stood around the room's edge unable to find spaces on any of the benches.

"Wow," my girlfriend said as we found a spot to stand in the corner.

I agreed with her assessment, amazed that the county fair could still elicit that response. One year I found out the owners of the Worlds of Wonder exhibit inbreed their raccoons until they get one with two heads. Another, I watched Lil' Liz, the world's smallest woman, sitting alone watching wrestling on TV I suddenly wanted to donate money to something. And not one of America's funniest men, from Jerry Clower to James Gregory, lived up to the self-appointed title. I did have one tiny upswing in mystery and appreciation last year after I watched countless rednecks go chin-scraped into the upcoming week after failing to master the Bizarro Bike that went left when you turned it right, but that didn't impress or surprise me like this did.

After nearly fifteen minutes, during which six or seven more people crowded into the room, the lights blinked three times and the man from out front stepped on to the dais.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, speaking slowly as he gripped the microphone with one hand and punctuated each syllable with the movement of a cane, "the mysteries of the Orient, ancient healing techniques, the snake girl, the zonkey." He paused and passed his cane over the entire audience. "And Mr. Mayhem, the world's only self-aware pig!"

The crowd applauded reluctantly as the curtain rose and the man lowered the microphone as far as it would go. I had a feeling many of them waited for thirty minutes or more and their applause relayed only their impatience.

When the applause stopped, the man now offstage and the microphone nearly on the floor, everyone, even those standing, craned their necks and leaned forward. A pig stood on stage. Mr. Mayhem, smaller and pinker than I imagined. He wore a boiler and a vest designed to look like the Union Jack. He walked languidly up to the microphone, his face looking forlorn and unctuous, and the sound of his hooves meeting the wooden stage became the only sound in the room. Even the sounds of the fair, normally so insoluble this time of year, could not penetrate the

makeshift room where everyone transfixed on the movements of the pig. For what had to last over a minute, Mr. Mayhem only stood there, eyes glazed over and breathing heavily in the microphone, a new cadence to the suspense. The speakers popped with each exhale and the undulating crowd grew more and more anxious.

Finally he spoke, his voice soft and supine.

"Can you believe where I'm at in my life?"

With that he slowly turned away from the microphone, little by little beginning to walk away from the sudden and honest applause, and I, like I imagine most there that night, walked away a little happier with the world.

My Dementia

My dementia began on the day that it began.
I didn't notice at first, with consciousness being an error anyway,
And still acting gracefully within the happy convergences
Of simple association, the poorest currency of thought.
But like a schoolboy, I spent that money on sweet nothings,
Like the names of places, the faces of companions,
The aspect of rooms I had been in,
But one wall was always missing,
Or the floor, erased by an angry god
Embarrassed by the act of having been thought into existence.
Juxtaposed between immediacy and its surrounding vacancy,
I descended into minute recollection
Of my last lazy reverie,
Which is how you found me here,
Sage that I am.

A Psalm

Do not depart, my unbelief.
You are scheduled to storm on Tuesday.
The expectations of many others depend upon it.
I love your cool round shoulders nudging the sunshine.
Your laugh is as implacable as any god's anger.
But the gift of your silence is immeasurable.
There, now, your first gentle drops nod the flowers
Of the Althea blooming at my window.
Whose soft round petals slice the air at the wind's source.
Let the rain of wisdom transform our sky,
And all our seeing emerge from within, like stars turned inward
Towards a fiery core, their pinprick selves laid scornfully near,
Unaware of the patterns randomly chosen by the needful.

In the Dusk of Otherwise

But one day, I know it will be otherwise.

Jane Kenyon

Tonight I heard your young star
skip across the celestial backbone;
watched, as you scattered syllabic petals
to trail April's mammoth moon.

I thought of silk and ash, satin and balsam,
New Hampshire birch and maples,
and the jabberwocky of loons
gathered on a cool, rustic lake,
during a quiet, autumnal afternoon.

In snapshot meadows,
I pictured Donald and you,
walking slow and easy through milkweed and lavender;
hands clasped loosely in a comfortable hold;
feeding each other cerebral fruits,
you'd later use
to pen poems that replicated your paradise.

But the image grew cold,
quickly dissolving into static snow
and the disconcerting memory
of you, abdicating flesh and bones,
to secure introductions
with Heaven's Publisher.

Now you pioneer poetic epistle
as a bright-faced, apostolic star,
visible to questioning hearts;
affirming love's immortal locomotion,
beyond, in the dusk of otherwise.

The Nineteen Sixties

How many nineteen sixties?
Let me count them.
Three bad sixties:
The sixties of the war,
The sixties of the drugs,
The sixties of the assassinations.
Three good sixties:
The sixties of the music,
The sixties of the men who flew to the moon,
The sixties of the liberations.

FRANK NEWTON

Janis Joplin Helps Repair the Grave of Bessie Smith

Bessie's blues inspired her Texas sister.
Her ghostly voice in grooves sings past her grave.
Now Janis testifies as her grave-tender.
Keep green the thought of all that you can save.

HALEY BLACK

Chicken Leg



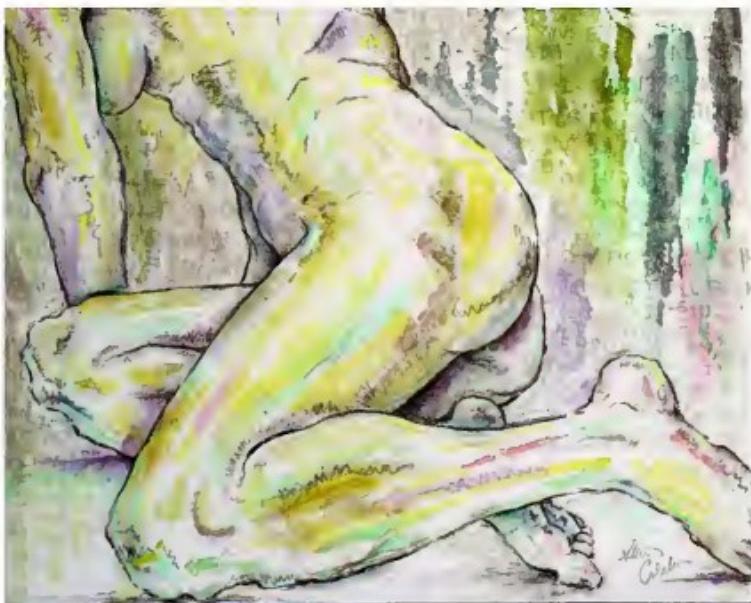
TIFFANY BURNS

Bob Marley



STEVEN CALABRESE

Figure 1



KATE GAZAWAY

Runaway Time



KG

TYLER KUCIFER

Putt Putt



BRAD LAIL

Face Jug



CHARLIE STEINKE

Still Life



BRIDGET WALLACE

Butterfly



A Fallow Time

The cripple in my rearview gave me the finger. We had this ritual between us. I slowed down next to him, gave my horn a toot and shouted, "Need a ride?" out the passenger window. He flipped me off and kept on hobbling up the hardscrabble shoulder of Route 401. One pant leg was full of air, folded and pinned primly to his cheap cardboard belt. His face, all gristle melting into his grey-black face, was inward and determined. Something in him was locked and loaded, full automatic, his enraged crutches flailing, his hands clenched hard on the cross-members. The handles of four plastic Food Lion bags bit into his wrists, turning the skin white. Receding in the rearview, he galloped fast, finding sure footing somehow on the rutted shoulder. I often thought how much he looked like a three-legged dog back there, bouncing along, eyes fixed and howling. I always felt shame at thinking that about him.

He only took me up on my offer once. It was summer, and a primal summer rainstorm was hammering the road. The raindrops were fat and oily, slamming onto the blacktop and bouncing. My wipers were maxed, smacking frantically to push away the rain. Visibility dropped to nothing, and I flipped on the four-ways and crawled up the road at 35mph. I saw him then, hobbling up what I thought of as "his" shoulder. He was not rushing; there was no point. He was soaked, his groceries were soaked, it was over for him.

I didn't give him a choice, pulling my pickup onto the shoulder in front of him and throwing open the passenger door. He stopped as his crutches slapped up against the side panel of my pickup; he stared at it, confused. He grunted and pulled down the tailgate, boosting himself up with surprising grace. He secured his crutches and wrapped a cargo strap around his arm. He gave the bed of the truck three hard, impatient punches: *let's go*. OK, then. I pulled back onto the road and gave it as much gas as I dared.

I could see him in profile back there, staring and bouncing as we hit the familiar potholes and cracks. Despite the rain, I saw enough of him to get a sense of his age, and I saw how relentlessly age and deep injury weighed upon the man. The missing leg was obvious, but he also

bore the scar of a deep gash across the right side of his head, ripped there long ago from eyebrow to ear. If you lived out in the county long enough, you got to see the most horrific injuries. People and machines were always confronting, and the machines always won. Sometimes the machines were merciful – some considered it a mercy – and they left the mangled man with his life, and a few raw mementos.

I knew where he lived, I'd seen him on his porch often enough. I turned onto the bypassed rut of Route 98 and headed to his place. I had already started to slow down as I approached, but he yelled a deep, ragged "Yo!" and hammered the side of the truck. *Let me out here.* I watched as he slid off the tailgate and put those crutches to work.

He pulled himself up onto his porch and went inside, slamming the door behind him with a crutch. The shack was sagging, seemingly composting, any color it might have held long ago bled brown and gray. Nothing man-made could hold its color through so many seasons crouched in the open under that mean, pissed-off sun. I gave it ten years before it collapsed into a pile of old lumber. A weary, drooping wire ran from the electric pole on the road to somewhere behind the house. The wire squirted the precious juice in from the road, powering the television that went on within seconds after he slammed the door. As the sun went down behind the last of the storm cloud, I could see a small naked bulb glowing orange, suspended from the ceiling of the front room. The orange and the cool blue of the television competed as the sun went down.

In the picked-over dooryard sat an old tree, a branch ridden sore and stripped by a creaking brown rope. The tire swing hung pointlessly at the end of the rope, all lumpy and rotten, shaped by generations of long-gone bodies.

8

The next year, he upgraded. He was mobile! Driving home from work I saw him, no longer exiled to the shoulder, he was screaming up 401 at 20mph. He had graduated from crutches to the miracle of internal combustion, riding a beat down, stripped down moped straight up the middle of the lane. Really howling up 401 now, his face obscured behind a red football helmet with a faceguard. I laughed as I passed, rolling down the passenger window as I went around him and cheering him on.

"Go, go, go Speed Racer!"

I beeped and gave him a thumbs up, and in return, he gave me the finger. I watched him in the rearview, that finger jammed up into the air and twisted triumphantly in a vicious corkscrew motion. You could tell he had the whole wide world by the balls.

#

I guess it would have been spring, the bad heat just starting, when the candy-apple red Benz came and parked in the dooryard. A young black man walked around on the yellow clay, stooping to swipe at the clay dust clinging to his good leather shoes with an immaculate handkerchief. I let the car slow and drift past the shack, doing what people in the county were never supposed to do, poking my nose into another man's business. I hoped that whatever trouble this well-dressed young man brought with him, it wasn't about money. I'd seen too many foreclosures up and down this stretch; half the old farm shacks out here were empty and overrun with kudzu. I decided that this young man didn't look like he brought money trouble with him; they never dressed that nice when they came to take your farm and your life away from you.

Speed Racer heaved himself out the door and hobbled slowly down the stairs. He stood there in the dooryard, open, no guile in him, loosely balanced on the crutches. The young man put out his hand, and Speed hesitated a long time before he took it. Then, awkwardly, like children randomly paired off to dance, the two men hugged. Their hands flapped around each other, trying to remember how to put their arms around each other and squeeze. They sorted it out and their hug became something they remembered how to do.

I'd seen way too much of this other man's business. I drove on.

My life didn't take me back up Route 98 for almost three weeks. When I drove past, I saw that the shack was gone. Just completely gone. It had been pulled down and the remnants of it hauled away. The spot where the shack had huddled was empty, scraped bare, ruts and gouges of some heavy machine all across the yard and out into the field behind it. The tree had been left for some reason, its tire swing dead and heavy at the end of the old rope. I pulled over onto the shoulder and got out of my truck.

The quiet was a big thing this far out, almost no one had any reason to come down this way since the bypass went through. Cicadas sang and then grew silent and bored. The tobacco fields, empty and plowed under, spread out behind the empty space. Looking around, I saw that some misguided fool had scattered a fair amount of seed around. I shook my head and leaned on the bumper of my truck. Had to be someone from the city, no one out here was stupid enough to think that grass would sprout on the baked hardtop of the yard. What the crows didn't get would be rotted and gone in two weeks.

The sad wire that delivered the magic juice was raveled, flaccid, tied off at the pole up near the road.

#

Winter is here now, for what it's worth. A fallow time, even quieter than normal out here in the back end of the county. There's some snow out there. I drove down 98 this morning on my way home from the hardware store over in Youngsville. Speed Racer's place is nothing now but a vague, snow-dusted hump in the field. The tree is there, and the tire sags from it, the belly of it cupping clean snow. The electric poles fan out behind the hump and march off over the hill, miles away, fuzzy with the filaments of dormant kudzu.

It Cannot Happen

it cannot happen
so it is
a movie
running backwards

the shattered glass
now newly blown
the wine upon the floor
reversed

a second chance
to taste
in first perfection

*"...taste and see that the
Lord is good..."*

Psalm 34:8

GREGORY RAMIREZ

*September 10th
on the California State University campus in Fresno*

A cloud passes,
Its shadow rolling beneath
Each step I take
Through the Peace Garden

As Gandhi stares
Towards the east
& Dr. King dons a robe,
Clinging an infant.

A young woman eats grapes
Near Cesar Chavez's feet,
Perusing a leather-bound Bible
Set on grass between her thin brown legs.

Even a young Sikh
Whose turban & olive skin
Others might mistake for a Muslim
Strolls & scratches his black beard.

Students mingle—as usual—
In the Free Speech Area,
Where leaning bushes eavesdrop
& words are drowned
As a plane passes in a blue sky.

GREGORY RAMIREZ

Discovering Gustav Klimt's The Kiss

for Stephanie Corinne Ramirez

This painting is ours
Because it is we
Whom Klimt captured

A century ago.
Donned in golden garb
As piano keys

Checker me
And your figure fuses
With irises, hyacinths,

And chicories
Covering the hillside
Where you kneel.

Where Nature
Yearns for
Your pearly flesh

And red hair to produce
Roses and magnolias
For selfish reasons.

I fight back.
With both hands,
I tilt your head

And kiss
Your rosy cheek.
My coarse black hair

GREGORY RAMIREZ

And wreath
Being all one sees
As we turn

From this strange mirror
And take its radiance
Wherever we may go.

First Person Infinite

Like most infants, I would often cry inconsolably during the night, which led to my mother feeding me chocolate, which she later claimed was the only act that would quiet me. It never occurred to her that she used this excuse to eat chocolate too, but there we would be, in the dark hours of the morning, her tearing open the wrappers, the snap of the indented bar but a prelude to an orgiastic symphony of movement from the giving hand to the receiving mouth. Perhaps I learned to awaken again and again not from the original impulse, whatever that may have been, but from the desire for chocolate, or perhaps the chocolate cried out for me in the night, in that transference of intention of which only infants and psychotics are indeed capable. But if so, I answered the only way I knew how, so that after my first birth I experienced a second birth, beneath the swaying lamp in that little kitchen, in the sweet baptism of mother and child, the holy communion of pleasure.

It was not until later that the hand which fed me became part of a larger universe, as my mother's rotund figure became the fixed planet occupying my horizon, each and every second. They have discovered now that our body weight is mainly a matter of genetics, and that we have little control over our ultimate fleshly conclusion, and that if you are meant to be fat, you will only be happy in a fattened state, or, to turn out otherwise, you must be prepared to be hungry forever. I think it's strange that other impulses which are genetically inherited and acted upon, such as the desire to murder, rape and pillage, are not considered unalterable, but imply strict moral choices; indeed these acts are rightly punishable in the civilized world, at least when it's acting civilized. But the civilized world has its own punishments for those who transgress their appropriate amplitude of flesh, and I am a living example of its silent flagellations.

I was the chubby child, who visited your house and ran as little as possible, but pestered you constantly about when the next meal would arrive. I would steal food if you didn't give me enough (by my Rabelaisian standards) and would often disappear behind the house, with my bounty tucked under my shirt, gorging silently within the space between

the shrubbery and the foundation. Other children don't appreciate attention being diverted from their ego-boosting activities, so I quickly became unpopular, and was rarely invited back. By the time I was ten years old, I was amazingly sedentary, which inadvertently led to my nickname of Kool-Aid, which was given to me because any superfluous activity on my part led to my jowls becoming not rosy, but the exact hue of Red 40, the food additive, which, besides causing cancer in abused laboratory rats, makes mass-manufactured chemical compositions pleasing to the eye, and therefore, to the palate.

Eating and reading were my only pleasures. By the time I was fourteen, I weighed nearly 250 pounds, but I had read a whole library of books, consoling myself with the passive expectations of words upon a page. Public school, for the socially unacceptable, is always a nightmare, but I never let the finger-pointing smirks unnerve me. I occupied my own universe of obscure literary allusions and midnight food binges, so that all my non-food thoughts were planted squarely upon my next acquisition of knowledge, which is, in itself, a sort of plumpness, also made acceptable by the pleasure of its reception. Overeating and over-reading seem to me to be compatible vices. But then love, like a shower of rare chocolates falling into my lap, overthrew even my unhealthy balance with its fleeting promises.

In another, thinner life, Dalia and I would have, doubtlessly, been compatible. I was eighteen, and about to leave the vacuum which had been my public school life for an expected life of minimum wage, because even with my innocent erudition, I did poorly in school, and would not have gone to the sideshow of the university for anything. She was seventeen, still a year away from graduation, with weight issues (so they call it now) of her own. Still, (I told myself), do not even the obese deserve those moments of transcendence, which lead at least to the light-footed mirror image of normalcy? We don't expect "being" in itself to be our inheritance, we have too much "becoming" within us to expect any fate besides that of the anonymous members of a lepers' colony. Yet even outcasts create a society, whose rules are no more and no less unconscious and irrational than the dictates of the latest worm of fashion and moneyed propriety.

After months of longing and distant looks, I finally asked her on a date. She agreed to go out the following Friday, but we carefully hid our attention to each other, because if any of the students found out, the

jokes at our expense would never cease. There would be jokes about our combined weight (I was up to 350 pounds), jokes about how much we would eat, all the usual jokes we bore easily as individuals, but, as a couple, would have been devastating. I had only just begun to have intimations of fat as fate, of obesity as the ultimate act of individuation. But at the time, I was only interested in the possibility of another person sharing my life, even if it was only a life of bad habits and dreamy literary allusions.

I borrowed my mother's car, and picked Dalia up outside her parent's house. I had especially arranged to pick her up outside, because I did not want to meet her parents as I was. I did not wish to be a witness to the long-jawed looks they would unearth in my presence, since I was already struggling with enough negative self-perception. As with all obese people, I planned to lose all of my weight in the fairy-tale future, after the ice cream. After we got into the car, she sat back as far as she could in the passenger seat, sucking in her breath as she pulled the seatbelt across, the length of brown fabric miniaturized above her ample middle. With an effort, she just snapped the buckle into place, a flower-print frock bundle of discomfort. I reached toward the driver's door, grabbing the coat hanger I had looped through the seatbelt, and pulled the brown fabric across, until I could hook the coat hanger into another one I had earlier pushed through the seat and secured underneath. "I gave up such pretensions long ago," I told her, and she laughed, unbuckling her seatbelt altogether. We drove twenty miles outside of town, to a locally owned steakhouse, where we would not be recognized. I was, at first, entirely reluctant to eat in front of her, and in public. With so much food before us, it was only a matter of time before the mask would fall away, and the personal eating, pursued so much in secret, would arrive like some Greek monster, to devour one or both of us. But like true lovers, we discreetly laid down the ground rules by our actions, and the rules were that we could do whatever we pleased, without censure.

When we arrived back at her house, in the cricket-singing darkness of the tree-lined street, we sat in my mother's car with the windows down, enjoying the aftermath of our six-meals-in-one-journey, crowding each other in the front seat, our bodies, like the edges of objects in hallucinations, seeming to float ever closer together before settling back within their normal confines. Arms entwined, we kissed as only fat people can do, our heads and necks twisted sharply together, but with

our bodies rigidly facing forward, as if our inert torsos were immune to ecstasy. Like all young people, we were innocent and afraid, and having met the disapprobation of all the rest of society, we could hardly chance disappointing each other. Food was our one true love, and as I drove away, I imagined myself enjoying meals with Dalia in exotic places, a performer whose audience of one was perfectly attuned to his every nuance of choice, every layer of repetition.

But when I returned home, I found my mother unconscious, in a diabetic coma. Over the next few weeks, I didn't know if she would live or die. She had excused her perpetual weakness and lack of stamina, and had played it off as a proper symbol of southern womanhood, excusable in a woman her size. She never totally recovered her health, and remained at an alternating level of convalescence. I did not go to school for several days, but I had called Dalia as soon as possible, to tell her I would not be there, and that I was totally indisposed. When I returned, she showed a good deal of concern, but I detected an underlying distance in her manner. It was three days later, when she made excuses to avoid going out on another date, that I discovered why.

I was crossing the hallway between classes, the staging ground for the usual assortment of stares and giggles, when I saw Dalia at her locker with another heavyweight, not the football player type, but seventy-five pounds lighter than myself, just under the line of hopelessness, and in whom I recognized myself two years earlier. Just as in beauty there are gradations between simple unheralded attractiveness and that startling combination of features which is the exact mirror of desire, so in grotesqueness there are also lines, which, once crossed, make you no longer available for refurbishment. I had unknowingly crossed that line, and in the happiness appearing before me, and which I had tasted so recently, I was witnessing a morality play which offered two divergent paths for the actors and their audience: heaven or hell. Two months later, I graduated from high school without attending the service, using my mother as an excuse, and went on an eating binge that made the building of the pyramids seem like an under-funded government project.

In my unhappiness, I watched movies. The flat images of perfect bodies made me feel more normal, since I rarely looked in the mirror. At 475 pounds, I was now an entity unto myself. At home, I was totally unconscious of myself; I had my mother to look after, and all the chores belonged to me. But when I went out, deplorable though I was,

I developed a stoic intrepidity. True, I only went out to the grocery store and video store, but I had slowed the world down to my size, my immensity. I found the quick movements of children and adolescents extremely irritating, like insects in a swarm, but I trained my brain to respond only to my chosen stimuli, without remorse. I still enjoyed conversations with the owner of the video store, which was how I got a job there. What did I care if it was in the worst part of town? The sideshow would somehow be my destiny, and if my only stage was a minimum wage job where the culturally challenged came in for movies, so much the better.

When my mother passed away, I inherited the house, but I continued to work, and found that I could live on my small salary. After I topped 550 pounds, I knew I could never again go back to the fantasy of normalcy. When you are as big as I am, other people seem discounted, and they approach your silence and bulk as if you were a god, or, at least, the statue of a god. Normal human relations are impossible, even though you are as rational or irrational as the next person. "How did you become this way?" is what each look seems to ask, but I learned to pick out one questionable aspect of a person's appearance and stare at it with degrading intensity, until they avert their eyes from my own degradation. Like money or power, we all need our defense mechanisms.

Over the past five years, I have turned to blogging on the Internet, so I now spend much of my time repudiating and dismembering the opinions of those who can't see me. The anonymity of the web is the greatest gift to those like me, whose every argument in person is dissolved under the tremendous nay saying of my appearance. I take left-wing views, I take right-wing views; I have no patience with agenda. I am well known in a number of Internet communities, and my opinions are spoken of with deference and interest within those carefully chosen networks. I place my thoughts out into the world and receive constantly growing approbation. If you'll excuse the pun, we must all choose our confines carefully, if we are to have any weight in the world.

Now that I have reached 700 pounds, my heart is giving way. I had always planned to go to the doctor, I had always held within me the quaint belief, like a child who hears monsters in the closet and thinks that someone opening the door will dispel them, that surgery, pills, anything but exercise, would give me a new lease on life, an uplift to the downward pressure of my immensity. But the dreams of death have

already begun, and I have all but fallen silent before hope. At first I had vivid dreams of apocalypse, volcanoes plunging from the sky and crashing to earth, while I and my slow body, for whom lifting an arm is like lifting a person, move with alacrity through the landscape, rescuing others whom hope has also abandoned. But now, my dreams have become more mathematical, almost geometrical. I'm showered with the sharp points of triangles and flat rectangular planes. I rise in desperation beneath the deepening flow of empty geometric objects, filling the room like gold. But then there is one dream, which might be a daydream, which I remember with picaresque clarity.

I dream that I am flying in a cargo plane, surrounded by soldiers who are dressed in fatigues, mounted with gear. I am dressed in regular clothes, sitting on the floor between them, everyone silent with a strange solemnity, which I imagined at first was the usual attempt by others to ignore me in sullen disgust, but which is by no means malevolent. I am at the center of attention, but I am surrounded with an almost palpable air of expectation, like a religious icon.

When the plane lands, the rear cargo door opens, but instead of the usual tanks and machinery rolling out onto the tarmac, I'm helped up by the soldiers and walk down the ramp into the first light of dawn. In my dream, I am as I am now, over 700 pounds, and in my mind's eye, I am like a bowling ball about to roll over the standing soldiers, who have lined up on either side, so that I can walk between them in safety. I am in Baghdad Airport, but instead of getting onto a truck to traverse the dangerous miles between the airport and the city of Baghdad, I walk directly through the avenue of soldiers and into a fog, which clears only as I walk onto the main boulevard in Baghdad.

At such an early hour, no one has yet seen me. The buildings tower above me, the traffic is non-existent, and yet I am certain that I am to walk down this corridor, and that to be seen is my only duty. In this dream, I still have the strength to move my bulk around instantly, and as I lumber down the concrete sidewalk, a mother and child turn the corner and stop upon my approach. They yell out some words in Arabic, and begin pointing and laughing at me. They have never seen anyone so big, they say, and they call out to others who erupt from unseen streets, staring and laughing. As I walk forward, more and more Iraqis come out to see me, and though they scorn me and laugh at me, they are hugging each other, until there is a din made by thousands of happy people, a

roar of joy, and I feel neither humiliation nor fear. The streets are filled, people are leaning out of windows, it's as if I'm witnessing Voltaire's funeral, in which hundreds of thousands of Parisians passed his precious body through the streets, in homage to the great man.

Sunni, Shiite, Christian, Kurd, they are all hugging, each one the other, all boundaries broken by the sight of the corpulent giant walking unguarded through the streets of Baghdad. "This is the ultimate American," they seem to be shouting. "This pathetic muddle of flesh is the great danger to the east!"

Just then, in the midst of this roar of voices, the first shots ring out. This is why I am here, to draw out the true enemy, so that our soldiers can fire upon them, in plain sight of the citizens, who must see that the ultimate American is being sacrificed for the good of their country. As I lumber forward, the first shots hit my stomach, but no harm comes to me, they seem to lodge in the full foot of fat I have around my middle. But with each bullet, I become bigger, each tear in my flesh makes my bulk and height rise proportionately, so that I am as tall as a building, walking among the buildings on the main avenue of Baghdad.

By the time I reach the Euphrates River, I am done for. I can hear behind me the roar of the crowds, I can hear American soldiers firing upon each insurgent, but I am failing, my flesh is becoming heavier, I can taste the blood in my mouth, which, curiously enough, tastes like chocolate. As I tumble forward, my arms flailing, I think, "I am the orb of the west, I am Christendom, I am the body hanging from each Gothic arch, I am the towers falling on a clear day," until I crash into the river, into the muddled percussion of the waters closing over me. And when I awaken out of this dream, I am in my mother's house, and I am dying.

Lover

His hooded eyes
caress me
away from those
that would hold me.

His serpent arms
curl softly around me
with fangs
that tear my heart.

Blinded by need and
mindless with want

I kiss the wild sweet apple
juice of his mouth
that draws my blood up
to suffocate me

and send me
shattered
through the stars.

Bon Odori

My fingers trace the shape of a dead friend's delight
at the nightly dances during summer's festival of the dead.

Her cursive still swirls freely as a print dress
across the page snowy as white-out
save for ink's shadows,
where her image lingers,
as though death were no less reversible than a pink/yellow obi.

Gossip in Autumn

I hate my hometown
with its mad crickets' gossip in autumn
when they should be dead.

They're up past bedtime,
their night shift of talk their only concern,
like a bottom line.

Nocturnal, like fears,
they blanket the moon and make me turn cold
as winters of old.

Muscovites

I misunderstood. It's true—
myself, the world and you—
each divisible as sheets of isinglass.

But one as brain
and the breath of some air abandoning you,
slicing through my sides, holed as wreaths.

Ten Cents on the Dollar

When she caught the Spirit, momma cooked sometimes when she heard God say so. Other Sundays, she'd break a dish at my dad. He couldn't face her after church because a tithe, to Momma, is the right kind of love.

But Daddy didn't want to tithe because he was so scared that God would take away everything he loved. Because of porn, God might cook him and leave him alone and broke. Momma wouldn't look him in the face.

Sometimes Momma would just break down crying because she'd lose face with her church friends. Their men tithed, stayed sober and acted right. All godly and moral. Her religion could sure cook my Dad and make hate out of love.

I watched my parents give a tenth at life. Most days Momma made me cook and, bless his heart, but Dad just loved to drink till he got all shit-faced. But the sound of their marriage breaking bounced off the hardwoods and reached God.

The three of us liked car rides. We loved to get in the big, white truck, and God knows that one time Daddy hit the brakes when I brought up how I saw her face—that woman of his across town on Cook Street. I think she got his tithes.

Momma's eyes popped out of her face.
That day, she went to church and asked God
for a miracle: to make my daddy a tither
and to keep him from getting cooked
in hell for eternity. She sure broke
those knees in praying—out of love.

Catching the Bus

A day after it happened, a grey film of sadness coated the air in the Dumani household on Sky Road. Blinds and curtains were pulled shut, a drape of dust descended in the living room. The scent of cumin and curry from yesterday's uneaten dinner lingered.

Sita could not console her husband, Bhagwan. All night long she heard his old slippers shuffling along the hardwoods of their five-year-old house. A week earlier, she'd heard the sound of neighborhood kids laughing, running in the cul-de-sac and down the street: spring break. Their own boys, Prashanth and Raj, students at Lehigh University, worked in a lab over school break. She wondered how on earth she would deliver the news. Now empty nesters, the weeklong holiday meant little for the Bhagwan and Sita. When they were younger, spring break meant something — a trip to Florida or to India, a week of relaxation, and no homework. But now, spring break was just another work-day.

Bhagwan always kept the same schedule. Each morning he passed the school children at the busy intersection three blocks away. At the dangerous bus stop, middle-schoolers waited in their parents' cars. The bus always arrived after Bhagwan passed by, continuing his commute to B & B Labs in Durham.

But, the day of the accident, after midnight a storm had zapped the power while Sita and Bhagwan slept. Both heavy sleepers, they did not hear the rumble of thunder; nor did they open their eyes to flashes of lightning. With the electricity off, the alarm clock did not buzz at 6:45. Bhagwan jumped up anyway, sensing absence. He overslept by seven minutes.

Today, Sita found Bhagwan on the gold velvet couch. His long-lashed brown eyes stared at the closed blinds, circles dark beneath his eyes. "Did you sleep at all?" she asked. He would not look at her. "Bhagwan," she put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched. "Come, I've made some jasmine tea, and toast with mint jelly. I called your boss and told him you'll be out for the rest of the week."

Bhagwan got up, walked stiffly to the window, pulling up the

blinds by the cord. He squinted as if the light hurt his eyes, then he pointed to the street. "They live a stone's throw away. I can see the porch of their house from here. A pink bicycle on the porch."

Sita stood beside him, her eyes followed his finger to the porch seven houses away. Then her heart raced, remembering – the only other time he looked this gloomy was two years earlier when his own father had died. Bhagwan was so depressed he'd gone on antidepressants for a year. He spoke little, and had trouble sleeping more than four hours a night, his pants hung loose.

"I wonder if they are home now? Maybe they stayed all night at the hospital. Do you think I should go over, ask about her condition?"

"They are at the hospital. Wouldn't we be if it was one of our boys?"

He sat back down, shaking his head. "If they were still on break, it wouldn't have happened. What have I done?"

"Look, it wasn't your fault," she said calmly, sitting beside him, moving a pillow wedged between them. "The lights were not flashing. The girl, she ran into the street, she didn't look."

"The girl. Her name is Samantha. Samantha Kingsley."

"Samantha. Yes, of course. Look, the police didn't charge you. Stop blaming yourself."

Staring at the front door, he said, "She came to our house for Halloween. You were upstairs reading. She wore a princess costume, a gold and fake diamond crown. She sparkled and smiled. When I tried to give her extra candy bars she said one was enough, to save the rest for the little kids. She said, This is the last time I will trick-or-treat, I'm too old for it."

"Yes, she was a sweet girl. I have talked to both the girl and her mother."

"An only child. On the news last night they said she plays the violin and that she wants to be a scientist, like me, a scientist."

"It's not your fault. Come, have some tea, it's getting cold." When she said this, her gold bangles jingled like chimes.

He rubbed his eyes. "What if she doesn't make it?"

"We don't decide these things," she said, looking up at the ceiling.

"But, what if I killed a twelve-year-old?"

Sita touched her husband's round face, pushed a strand of hair from his forehead with her fingers. He moved away.

"Don't touch me, I am a monster." He reached for his keys, pressing the jingling keychain into her palm. "Take these from me. Please, take them."

"You'll drive again. You will." The keys jangled again and the phone rang.

He stared at his wife and then he jumped up. "I'll get it."

Her heart raced and she held the keys so hard against her hand, a mark imprinted on her palm. A red bird flit by the window, then it perched on the sill. Blood red feathers. A picture of what her husband told her flashed before the window. The blur of blonde hair in the road, the sound of thump and crash, screeching brakes, her body flying in front of him, a bird in slow motion. He reached out his hand as if to catch her. The screams and sobs of children and parents. Red blood streaking her hair, the body crumpled, curled on macadam.

A tolling church bell in the distance pulled her back. Her husband yelled "No!" Then she heard him sobbing in the kitchen, and the phone hit the floor.

If only that storm had not come, she thought, shutting off the power, then her husband would have passed by seven minutes earlier and missed the girl crossing the road to catch her bus. If only.

She held the pillow for comfort, stared at the front door, trying to picture Halloween, six months from now. The leaves yellow and brown and red, the knock on the door of trick-or-treaters. The absence of a princess, the absence of hands holding an empty sack out to be filled.

Ode to a Mountain Moon Song

the sun is waking up over the mountains
shooing the fog down through the valley
like a loving schoolteacher
and her young pupils

the town below opens a lazy eye
and yawns, spinning its breath
outwards to play in the morning dew

so you drive, with only the sounds of
leaves, crunching beneath tires
the trees rustling above,
beside,
and below,
every sense being seduced
and awakened
by the stains
of a new season

so you drive, the wind whispering
across your neck and arms
like a welcoming melody
that only home can play.

and the road never ends,
twisting and curling its head
into the neck of the mountains
inhaling the sweet, cold, crisp scent
of the unrestrained wild

the day wears on,
and the sun begins to fade
off into the distance,

looking for other valleys
to play with

and the sky burns
gold, sizzling and crackling
like a wildfire in its last
hoorah. And as night sets
cold on creaking trees,
the nightlife luminescent
sparkles to a new light.

so you drive, with the Duke
who has nestled himself
into your midnight radio.
And the moon sings
with his deep, throaty growl
that only moons can have

and there you are
on this mountain, slow dancing
to an unshakable silence
and for once in your life,
it all feels so undeniably real.

Working Man

dirt cracked nails
farmers tan
southern twang
a working man

early chores
pickup truck
tractor burns
a good man's luck

welded heart
calloused hands
breaking dawn
on working land

battle scars
blood and sweat
almost there
but just not yet

quitting time
'round twilight
up again
at morning light

but one day changed
that old man's world
small surprise from
his baby girl

small and pale
comsilk hair
holding hands
'bout everywhere

JOANNA WALLACE

front porch swing
lemonade
bright eyed girl
in a fake parade

fifty years
of walking steel
now brushing hair
and tickle squeals

green and gray
she got his eyes
damn working man
melts every time

Cactus and Starshine

Chapel Hill, 1972

The neon restaurant sign beckoned,
as we, two Victory Village graduate students,
hurried down the street pursued by icy chill
and frost of blue-smoke breath.
Wooden clogs and Spanish leather boots
echoed hollow retorts against the cobblestones.
We exploded into the welcoming warmth,
laughing, rubbing chilled cheeks,
stowing Icelandic coats, gloves,
wool scarves on waiting racks,
bathing luxuriously in the heat,
the candlelight and the Flamenco rhythm.
With icy fingers, we clutched
the tattered handmade menu
and idly scratched puddles of candle wax
on the table top etched with the initials
of lost lovers, found friends.
We oozed into comfort,
held hands across the table,
settling down into the booth
of the deserted restaurant,
pleased to have found a haven
on this Christmas Eve.
On the table a bowl of salsa awaited,
congealed sunshine in yellow pottery.
The waiter approached,
golden hair gathered into a pony-tail.
He wore a homespun blue shirt,
sandals with socks.
With a smile he greeted us,
touched his forehead in salute.
“Merry Christmas.
Glad to have some customers at last.”

On the table he set a woven basket
covered with a Peruvian multicolored cloth.
"The tortilla chips are on the house.
Our cook is in a festive mood.
Be sure to look at the carefully.
He cut them in the shape of stars."

Star-shaped tortilla chips,
Sunshine salsa,
The warmth of the two of us,
and above the booth a nativity scene,
illuminated in the darkened interior –
a halo, a swaddled baby,
a mother's glowing smile –
essence of Christmas.

Lessons from a Pipe

Smoke spirals about
resembling an old hope.
What once seemed solid
vanishes into nothing
as my hand stretches
to take the swirling beauty.
Hope is a decoy
like Sirens sweetly singing
filling anxious ears
and desire wells within,
but to seek the source
leads only to betrayal.
Such is foolish hope:
more fickle than a female
and as seductive
as prosperity gospel
to the impoverished.
None can take refuge in it
for when all seems safe, it fades.

My God is the Lord

1 Kings 19 in Verse

The altar's all but ruins
false prophets strewn about
swords have stayed their tongues
no longer shall they shout

The heavens have been opened
first with fire now with rain
commanded by that prophet
a remnant he remains

Anthems ring for this victor's King
but a foreign queen drowns the shouts
edict in hand, she seeks the man
who snuffed her prophets out

So for his life the prophet fled
to the south of that country,
below Beersheba, the wilderness,
and laid down beneath a tree

"I've done no more than my fathers
and I'd rather just be dead"
falling asleep, an angel came
with water and some bread

"Arise and eat regain your strength
your journey is too great"
so saying the angel disappeared
the prophet let to his fate

Being renewed he then arose
and began to travel on
while fasting forty days and nights
to Horeb, Mount of God

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

And in a cave he did abide
'til the LORD did call him out
then a mighty wind arose
and shook that holy mount

Yet He was not in the wind
but then the earth began to shake
and still the prophet searched
but God was not in this quake

Now fire arose burning all in sight
yet the LORD was absent from the glow
but then the prophet heard Him
in a whisper soft and low

And in that voice God revealed
to him His master plan:
Victory's not on the mountain
but in the desert land

Southern Comfort

1.

Cold air whips around my face as I zip my coat up to my neck. In less than two hours the sun will rise, but now there's no light. The moon is a white crescent slicing through the early morning sky. I smile as my father and I walk in full camouflage down a frozen dirt road in the middle of Nowhere, South Georgia.

Dad and I have hunted, fished, hiked and camped together for years. Since I was little, he has invited me to go dove hunting with his buddies. He took me deer hunting at my grandparents' house in Georgia and later in the Texas hill country. Some early mornings we would wake up and meet his friends out by a pair of small lakes and wait for the geese to fly in. We've gone hunting for duck and for quail, marching through weeds and thorns waist high. He's taken me deep sea fishing and he's helped me catch minnows in the shallow water of my grandparents' lake. We've gone camping in North Georgia's misty hills and hiked through the dry deserts of west Texas.

I don't think I'll ever forget the first time I shot a deer. Out in the rocky terrain of the Texas hill country, Dad and I sat in a rusty deer blind older than both of us put together. A steady rain drummed against the metal roof loud enough that we could talk quietly. We chatted as time passed. Eventually a large eight-point buck walked through the trees. Dad talked me through the motions, whispering from his chair behind me as I flipped off the safety catch on his old .410 shotgun. I shook with adrenaline. I pulled the trigger and the deer fell; Dad whooped with delight. It was a great feeling to have caused so much excitement. I felt a part of his meaningful world when we went hunting, like an adult, trusted enough to carry and fire a rifle.

Today, one of my favorite ways to relax is camping. In college there aren't many places I know of where I can still pretend to be Daniel Boone without being taken away in a straightjacket. I love the feeling of mud creeping between my toes as I stand fishing on the riverbanks,

I love the wind shaking the branches of the trees, the crackle of feet through broken twigs and brown leaves. I love the smell of dirt in the woods. I love that I can stand alone in a deep forest without feeling a bit of loneliness. In late November I can find bark rubbed from saplings where a buck has marked his territory. I can cook a fish over a small campfire and I can catch a snake better than anyone I've ever met. I might not be Daniel Boone, but that doesn't keep me from wishing, and that's all because of my father. Without him, without fishing, without hiking, without hunting, I wouldn't know any of this. He didn't teach me everything I know about the outdoors, but he made me want to know everything, and for that I'm more grateful. Together we've made something beautiful and something unique. There is something special that we share, something we both understand. Something not to be said, but known.

At my grandparent's house, Dad keeps a special rod and reel that requires a lot more skill to work than a typical fishing pole. The spool of fishing line is exposed, so it's up to the fisherman to hold his thumb on the line with just enough pressure. Too much and the cast is cut short, too little and a rat's nest forms at the base of the reel. Rather than using a bobber or watching the tip of the rod, Dad rests a bit of the line under his finger, feeling for vibrations. It's an incredible thing to watch. He stands at the bank, his back arched, staring into the water like it's trying to speak. He'll say something like, "I think that's a fish," and then without hesitation he jerks back on the rod dramatically and grunts like he's heaving fifty pound weights. He always laughs afterwards, especially if the lure comes soaring from the water unattached to a fish.

I've never been able to work that reel and I don't think I ever will, but that's fine with me. I enjoy the mystery of it all. It always makes me smile to stand beside Dad and see him arched towards the water, his finger beneath the line. When I think about it, that's how I'll always remember him: his finger resting beneath the line, always in control, smiling and trying to make the water speak.

2.

I was four years old when my family and I moved from Atlanta, Georgia, to Tampa, Florida. I was twelve years old when we moved from Tampa to La Vernia, Texas, (a speck of a town, population six hun-

dred and thirty-nine), and I was sixteen years old when we moved from La Vernia to the redneck haven of Lincolnton, North Carolina. Before I turned eighteen, I would grow up in six houses, attend five schools and live in four states. My parents worried that my nomadic childhood would be a scarring experience, or perhaps cause for resentment, but it was never that. In a lot of ways, I enjoyed moving.

I learned to love my role as "the new kid." I had chance after chance to find new friends and to reinvent myself. At an early age I learned the art of running from my problems. Any time things started to fall apart, I found myself transplanted hundreds and hundreds of miles away. It was marvelous...mostly. My only complaints were our final destinations.

I fantasized about my family arriving at our new apartment, situated neatly in Manhattan's upper east side. I longed for the beauty of the Seattle skyline. I dreamed about the warm smells of San Francisco's coffee shops. What I got was very different. I was stuck in the South. I couldn't run from the heat, the gnats, the barbecue or the sweet tea. I felt trapped in an uncomfortable pew, staring at my feet while a Baptist pastor screamed himself red-faced. The south seemed like a prison, and anyone who liked it had simply gone numb.

As I grew up I knew that both of my parents were born and raised in the southeastern United States, yet my mother's family was the only one I thought of as actually being Southern. For the bulk of his teenage years my dad grew up in Miami, which kept him completely separated from any rusty southern motifs. My mother, however, is a different story.

As a kid I remember trips to my mother's parents' house being very dramatic. As a young boy I noted that somewhere south of Macon, somewhere north of Tallahassee, things were very different. I remember visiting the rural rest stops and watching the miles and miles of kudzu strangling the trees. Some evenings we would pull off the interstate and stop at an old secluded gas station to get snacks. Every one sold boiled peanuts and fresh filets. A strange combination, I thought.

My mother's parents live on roughly seven hundred acres of bold south Georgian terrain. At the front of their property is a dirt road, slowly winding its way through dense patches of oaks and pines until the landscape opens wide and flat, revealing an eleven-acre lake, speckled with the humps of cypress knees. Hidden behind the lake is a stretch

of clay-filled marshes. As a kid I would disappear there for hours, occasionally coming back to the house for lunch and dinner, covered from head to toe in red Georgia clay. I enjoyed time at my grandparent's, mostly because it was a place where I could get really muddy and it not be a big deal. Though I enjoyed visiting, I felt strongly that it was not a place I belonged, nor a place I wanted to belong. From a distance, perhaps I would have never resented the south, but I'll never be sure. It seemed like the south was hunting me down. It wanted to strangle the life out of me, and in Texas, I think it nearly did.

After my family and I moved to Texas my parents became interested in the fabulous enterprise of goats and chickens. I wasn't too excited, to say the least. We moved half a mile down the road into a long, flat ranch house that seemed spitefully stabbed into the middle of five acres. After only a short time, I found myself knee deep in a horrible nightmare: my parents milking goats every morning before work. Yet, what bothered me most about the goats was not their foul excrement, their heads stupidly caught in the fence wires or their startling dirges that cut through the night. I couldn't pretend to be intellectual or interesting with dumb-looking goats, their defiling bleats resounding across my front yard. I couldn't pretend to be anything other than what I was. I was Southern. I had been branded.

After about a year, I remember Dad coming home from work and asking me about moving to Charlotte. It seemed enticing, especially given my current state of affairs living among goats. Only months later, we packed our things and drove halfway across America. We did not end up in Charlotte, however. After poking around the area, we settled in Lincolnton, a smaller town an hour north of Charlotte. Lincolnton was another picture of the south's essence; another small southern town steeped in barbecue sauce and honey mustard. A town where the tiled floors of Wal-Mart were sacred ground.

When I chose to attend college in a southern town almost as small as rural La Vernia, Texas, part of me was mortified. Don't do it, I told myself. This won't even be college. I think you're insane. Yet, due to the enticing promises of financial aid, I ended up attending that small private school, and it has been one of the most changing experiences of my life. It was there that I learned to appreciate my southern heritage, something I never expected.

In the fall semester of my junior year, I enrolled in an introduc-

tory ceramics course. We learned how to make vases, pitchers, coffee mugs and teapots all on the wheel. It was supremely difficult. Many of my final products looked like they were constructed by a thumbless ape in a fit of terrible rage, yet I slowly progressed. I made several pieces that I am proud of and I keep them in my room today.

We learned about the history of ceramics and their place in early southern culture. We learned about Native Americans shaping bowls with grit and persistence; we learned about folk pottery, giant pots with wild, angry faces; there were funerary urns and jugs of moonshine and it was here that I felt it for the first time. I felt a form of understanding and association. I buried my hands into the earth of the south and I made art...kind of. I sank my fingers into hundreds of years of southern tradition and molded it with my palms. I remembered the clay that I would sink into as a boy; buried to my knees in mud, and suddenly it all made sense. Through the process of creation I stumbled upon meaning and purpose. I thought about the stark beauty of west Texas, flat land and plateaus cast against a wide sky, the rolling smoky hills of north Georgia slowly relaxing into the piney marshes of the Piedmont South, the peaches, the pecans, the rusty pickups, steel guitars, the stain of red clay and I saw it in a new light. It was me and I was it; I was all of it. I closed my eyes and threw my weight into the clay.

LAUREN TAYLOR

Profile of Visiting Writer Ravi Howard



Ravi Howard visited Gardner-Webb University on April 8, 2008, as part of the Visiting Writers Series. Approximately 300 students read his novel, *Like Trees, Walking*. He attended classes, conducted a student workshop, and gave a public reading. Lauren Taylor interviewed Ravi Howard in Feature Writing class and wrote the following feature article.

In 1981, race relations in Mobile, Alabama, were shattered when 19-year old Michael Donald was beaten, stabbed, and hung from a tree on a residential street. Two men were eventually convicted for this crime, which was committed under order of a local leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Author Ravi Howard chose this real-life lynching as the focus of his first novel, *Like Trees, Walking*, which gives us a fictional account of a family and community's attempt to work through the grief, fear, and anger they experience after the loss of Michael Donald.

Howard created the Deacon family, who come from six generations in the funeral home industry. The novel concentrates on two teenage brothers, Roy (the narrator) and Paul Deacon, who struggle to come to terms with Michael Donald's murder. Paul, one of Michael Donald's friends, is the one to discover Michael's body, while Roy, already working for his father as the seventh generation in the family business, has to

handle Michael's body post mortem.

The novel shows how tragedy permeates a society—harming people in even the most unexpected ways. The lawyer handling the Donald case, for instance, becomes so caught up in research that he can't be there for his family. Also, Paul, the discoverer of Donald's body, falls into deep depression.

Having grown up in Alabama, Howard was able to blend local color and dialogue in the historical fiction novel, using characters he invented from actual acquaintances. With his uncle being a funeral driver, he was able to craft most of the novel from prior knowledge. He also met others during his college education who would add breadth to his story.

While attaining his B.A. in journalism from Howard University, a historically black school in Washington D.C., he met people who had come of age during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. He was able to draw inspiration from their experiences and bring them into his writing.

"It was interesting to see where they got that experience," Howard says.

Having had his interest ignited, he began to explore what contributions he could make to the movement that, to many people, is still moving. During grad school at the University of Virginia, he wrote originally a short story version of *Like Trees, Walking*, which won the Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers.

Even though the Donald tragedy took place over 27 years ago, the imprint of its horror stuck with Howard, only a child at the time.

"It happened when I was in first grade...I heard of it from my parents and family members being afraid," Howard recalls, "The Klan was sued (in 1987) and one of the members executed (in 1997)."

Howard's journey to becoming a writer began in the seventh grade. He was placed in a non-traditional learning environment that functioned like a language lab. Howard was hooked on words as a result of this lab. In high school, his senior year English teacher, also faculty advisor for the school's literary magazine, encouraged Howard. Though the emphasis in many schools is often placed on math and science, Howard says that writing is just as important.

"Students don't really look at writing as something that will prepare you for the future with standardized tests," Howard says.

But he insists that it does. Once Howard entered the job force,

he found that writers were in high demand—even by the National Football League. Howard worked for NFL Films as a producer from 2001–2005. He learned to work with sound, music, and video editors to put together pieces for various teams, including the Carolina Panthers.

"[It's] more important to find people to tell the *structure* of the narrative, whether it's a two-minute story or an eight-minute feature," he says.

By developing his writing in the context of these additional skills, Howard became successful. He won a Sports Emmy in 2005 for his work on HBO's *Inside the NFL*.

It was during his four years with NFL Films that he began working on *Like Trees, Walking*, which was well-received in his hometown of Mobile, where he and his wife now reside.

"My biggest fear was whether or not writing about a city you had not lived in a long time would be considered authentic," Howard says.

But authenticity came with drafts—lots of drafts—he says. Four years of them. Once you have written about a place and a character, you can see where you want things to go, Howard recalled.

Howard felt it was important that he give the readers space to make up their own minds about the lynching. He didn't want to lecture. He wanted to let the story carry itself. To aspiring writers of fiction, he warns against putting too much of your own authorial voice in the work.

"[It's] important to do editorial work and try to explain without explaining. Take a poetry course, playwriting courses," he suggests. "Tell everything through dialogue, and see how language works. There is always a temptation to explain a story to a reader as opposed to being able to illustrate."

Howard is now doing some freelance work, writing book reviews and guest teaching at colleges. He aspires to a full-time college teaching position in the area where his wife works as a pediatrician. And another novel is on the way, also set in Alabama, covering the time period from World War II to the Montgomery bus boycotts.

As for Mobile, it is evolving into a place where racial tension is being talked about. A big push for redevelopment is occurring in the neighborhood where Donald was hung, and the street's name was recently changed Michael Donald Avenue.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

JUDITH BEHAR is a mostly retired lawyer/mediator and former English teacher at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. She began writing poetry at a young age, inspired by a Louis Untermeyer anthology of poems for children. Some of her more recent poems have been published in *Main Street Rag*, *Crucible*, *Lines From a Near Country*, and *WordWorks*, among other places.

HALEY BLACK is a sophomore photography major from Colorado Springs, Colorado.

JAMES BREEDEN'S stories and poems have appeared in *The Main Street Rag*, *The Xavier Review*, *Arts Line*, *the Piedmont Literary Review*, *Wellspring*, *Iodine Poetry Journal* and a dozen or so other magazines. In 2004, the Finishing Line Press published Breeden's *The Shadow of Longing*, a poetry chapbook. He is currently looking for a publisher for his first novel.

BETH BROWNE'S creative nonfiction has been published in various journals, and her poetry recently appeared in *Crucible*. Browne lives on her great grandfather's farm near Raleigh, North Carolina, with her two children and a pair of fancy rats.

TIFFANY BURNS is a junior communications major from Sumter, South Carolina. This is her first appearance in *The Broad River Review*.

STEVEN CALABRESE is a senior fine arts major from Boiling Springs, North Carolina. His art was awarded "Best in Show" at the 2008 Student Art Show at Gardner-Webb University. He enjoys music, nature, philosophy, and making art. His art has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

KEVIN MARSHALL CHOPSON teaches at Davidson Academy in Nashville, Tennessee. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *English Journal*, *Cellar Roots*, and *New Madrid*. He will receive his MFA from Murray State University in May 2008.

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN is the author of four books, including the novel *Drops of the Night* (2006) and poetry collection *An Endless Tapestry* (2007). Her stories have also been collected in *Blue Ridge Shadows* (2002) and *The Stone Carver* (2005). Her biography and credits appear in *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Mountains* (2007). Duncan sets her fiction and poetry in a North Carolina textile town called Milton, based on her hometown Marion, North Carolina, where she lives and works at McDowell Technical Community College.

TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON is the author of a collection of poetry entitled, *Thread Count*. Her work has been published by *Paris Voice*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Forsyth Woman*, in five anthologies by *Old Mountain Press*, and was accepted in the Northwest Cultural Council's 2006 and 2007 International Juried Art & Poetry Exhibits. In 2006, she became a member of the "Courses for Community" faculty at Salem College, teaching a class entitled, "Poetry as Distilled Experience." Currently, she conducts poetry workshops for area teenagers, sponsored by the Forsyth County Public Library, and works as a freelance technical medical editor.

STEVE GALLAGHER is a writer and playwright who lives in North Carolina. His fiction has appeared in *Quay Review*, *Aries Anthology*, and a special 'Teaching Katrina' issue of the Claflin University annual. He can be reached at steveg144@gmail.com.

KATE GAZAWAY is a senior communications major from McDonough, Georgia. She enjoys working with non-profit organizations, taking photographs, and traveling. Her photography has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*, and her photograph of the Gardner-Webb University men's basketball victory over the University of Kentucky was picked up by the Associated Press and appeared in newspapers and online all over the United States.

SUSAN HASLER is a former CIA intelligence analyst who now spends her time writing fiction, working with stained glass, and making lamp-work glass beads.

SUMMER HESS graduated from Gardner-Webb University in 2006 with a degree in English. Upon graduation, she took off to South America

for a year of teaching and traveling. She is currently working as programs coordinator at an after school youth center. Hess loves to read, write nonfiction and poetry, and rescue dying houseplants from grocery stores. Her writing has appeared in *Newsweek* and previous editions of *The Broad River Review*.

MATT HUMPHRIES is an adjunct instructor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University. He enjoys shooting too many three-pointers when playing basketball, and was once supposed to meet Patrick Swayze, but didn't.

MEGAN JAYNES is originally from Saskatchewan, Canada, and now resides in Cleveland County with her husband. She has majors in business and visual arts. Her cover art, "Still Life," is her first appearance in *The Broad River Review*.

MATT JONES studies biology and environmental science at Gardner-Webb University. He enjoys traveling to new places, distance running, working in the garden, playing music, and drinking coffee with friends. Upon graduation, he plans to travel for a while and attend graduate school to study sustainable agriculture or agroecology. Jones has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

TYLER KUCIFER is a photography major from Marietta, Georgia. He is interested in unconventional music, installation art, expressive film, people watching, and nature photography. His photography has won contests in the past, but the *Broad River Review* is his first publication.

BRAD LAIL is a sophomore art and psychology major from Cherryville, North Carolina. He has a love for traditional pottery, and he likes to throw functional pieces like pitchers, bowls, and mugs as well as decorative pieces, such as face jugs. He is a very prestigious young potter who has a passion for carrying on the Catawba Valley tradition of turning out traditional stoneware.

DRAY LLOYD is a senior English major with a concentration in creative writing. The subject of his senior thesis is the work of Bob Dylan. While his favorite author is Joseph Heller, he dreams of the lifestyle of

Hunter S. Thompson. After graduation, he plans to live for one year in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where he will play poker as research for a book. This is Lloyd's first publication.

ROBERT McCALL, a native of Shelby, North Carolina, has been writing poetry and fiction all of his adult life. He entered North Carolina State University as an engineering student, but soon discovered that literature was his true love. He credits his writing inspiration to studying under novelist Lee Smith and his personal study of a wide range of poetry and philosophy. McCall has been working in North Carolina and South Carolina libraries for the last fifteen years, and currently manages the Saluda Community Library in Saluda, North Carolina.

MAUREEN E. MURPHY is a member of the Connecticut Poetry Society. In 2007, she was selected as one of the winners in the Connecticut Hospital Association's contest on Hospital Heroes. Murphy is a mother of four, and her oldest son, Robert Dowden, recently completed his undergraduate studies at Gardner-Webb University. This is Murphy's third appearance in *The Broad River Review*.

JACK NAISH is a senior English major with a creative writing emphasis. He enjoys reading and writing and is an avid collector of Charles Bukowski's poetry and prose. This is his first publication.

FRANK NEWTON has been a librarian at Gardner-Webb University since 2000. He tries to be influenced by Chinese poetry, which he studied under J.P. (Sandy) Seaton at UNC-Chapel Hill. He dreams of someday writing the lyrics for a popular song. He is married to Julia Newton, and they have one son, Lanny. Newton's poetry has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

JANEY PEASE is currently pursuing post-master's certification in Expressive Arts Therapy at Appalachian State University with the goal of integrating her skills in poetry, music, and therapy. She has taught as an adjunct professor for universities in the Carolinas the past six years. Her plan for self-renewal this summer includes cultivating blue potatoes, heirloom tomatoes, and a variety of culinary herbs with her youngest grandchildren. This is Pease's fourth appearance in *The Broad River Review*.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

GREGORY RAMIREZ was born in Fresno, California, where he was raised and currently resides with his wife, Stephanie. He graduated from California State University, Fresno (CSUF) with his bachelor's and master's degrees in English. He has published poetry in *Flies, Cockroaches, and Poets, hardpan: a journal of poetry*, and Heyday Books' reprinting of *Highway 99: A Literary Journey Through California's Great Central Valley*. He has also taught at CSUF, Fresno City College, Willow International Center, the University of Phoenix in Fresno, and College of the Sequoias in Visalia.

TRUDY ROTH is a senior at GWU majoring in Art. She lives in Marion, North Carolina, with her husband Skip. She enjoys painting, drawing and spending time with her family. Roth is a Basic Skills Instructor with McDowell Community College. She hopes to use her degree to teach art history. Roth's work has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

MAUREEN A. SHERBONDY'S fiction has appeared in *The North Carolina Literary Review*, *moonShine Review*, and in the anthology (Knoxville Writers' Guild) *Low Explosions: Writings on the Body*. A story was a finalist in Southeast Review's "World's Best Short-Short Story Contest." Maureen's first chapbook, *After the Fairy Tale*, was recently published by Main Street Rag. A second chapbook, *Praying at Coffee Shops*, is forthcoming from Main Street Rag in March 2008.

ALLEN SMITH is originally from Durham, North Carolina, although he has lived with his partner in Alexandria, Virginia, for more than a decade. Smith has published poems in *Bay Leaves*, *Crucible*, *Maryland Poetry Review* and *Off the Rocks*, among other publications, and recently has been on a Peter Cameron and Doris Kearns Goodwin reading frenzy, enjoying *The City of Your Final Destination* and *Team of Rivals* in particular.

CHARLIE STEINKE is a business major from Jacksonville, Florida. While not running for the track or cross country teams at Gardner-Webb University, Steinke enjoys the outdoors, sports, and working on cars.

LAUREN TAYLOR is a junior journalism major from Charlotte, North Carolina. She has been writing since the age of twelve, and she aspires

to be an international journalist. Her work is published regularly in *The Pilot*, Gardner-Webb University's student newspaper.

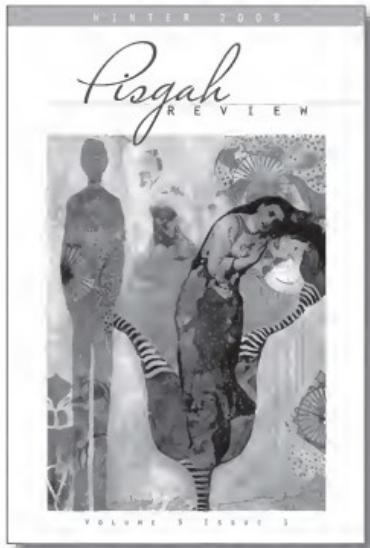
BRIDGET WALLACE is a visual arts major from Greenville, South Carolina. Her interests include photography and art history, and she is also a singer-songwriter who plays guitar. Wallace is a member of Upstate Visual Arts (UVA), which, in addition to the Student Art Show at Gardner-Webb University, has shown her photographs.

JOANNA WALLACE is a senior English and political science major from Matthews, North Carolina. She enjoys hiking, running, playing guitar, horseback riding, and reading. After graduation, Wallace plans to work for an environmental non-government organization in Colorado as a communications writer, as well as conduct international missions dealing with poverty aid and shelter capacities. Wallace's work has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

C. PLEASANTS YORK is the author of two books of poetry, *Pleasanties* and *Weaver of Destiny*. Over the years, she has taught all levels from Project Head Start to community college. She is president of the Lee County Arts Council, and, with her husband, Guy, serves as Second Vice-President of the North Carolina Poetry Society. They are the parents of three published poets – Adam, Emily and Jonathan – and owners of Monroe Franklin, a dachshund puppy.

ANDREW ZAWIERUCHA is a senior from Cary, North Carolina. He is a Religious Studies major with a concentration in Biblical Languages and an English minor. Drinking coffee, smoking a pipe, and reading classic literature are a few of his favorite activities. The writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and C.S. Lewis have played influential roles in the development of his own theology, which comes across in his writings. An overarching theme throughout his writing is the understanding that God teaches through the joys and pains of life, and both are blessings.

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